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Young Nones: Young People of No Religion

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signed

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Abstract

Identifying what is important in the self-interpretations of young people who report no religion, this study examines how relationships of difference to religion relate to matters of importance.

Twenty-three Year 10 pupils (14- and 15-year-olds) from two non-denominational secondary schools in the West Midlands who ticked the 'no religion' box on a questionnaire were asked to take photographs to represent what was important to them. These were used as prompts for discussions during one-to-one interviews that explored what was important to these young people, before asking questions about religion and their reasons for reporting none.

Taking a relational approach to the study of non-religion (Lee 2012a; Quack 2014), this thesis identifies participants' relationships of difference to their constructions of religion. Understanding identity as a self-interpretation relating to things that matter to us (Taylor 1989), it determines whether and how relationships of difference are significant in participants' self-interpretations and how, therefore, ticking the 'no religion' box on a questionnaire relates to issues of identity.

Participants' constructions of religion and their decision to report none were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance, and what they considered to be important was reflected in their beliefs about life, the end of life, life after death, God, the supernatural and prayer. While many participants held beliefs adapted from religious traditions, they considered these to be different from those they associated with religion. The question of whether participants expressed non-religious identities depends on the relative significance of relationships of difference to religion in participants' self-interpretations. For the majority of participants, relationships of difference to religion were not of central importance, meaning that very few should be categorised as having non-religious self-identities.

Implications are drawn for the study of youth, religion and non-religion and for the teaching of religion and belief in schools.

Introduction

Context

In 2011, approximately 25 per cent of the population of England and Wales reported that they have ‘no religion’. In the 2001 Census, only 15 per cent of the population had chosen to tick the ‘none’ box in response to the question ‘what is your religion?’¹ The increase in the number of people choosing to identify in this way was mirrored by a reduction in the number of people choosing to identify as Christian – from 72 per cent in 2001 to 59 per cent in 2011. When the data from the 2011 Census was published, initial reactions of representatives from both religious and non-religious institutions implied that the intention of census respondents was self-evident. For the Rev. Arun Arora, Director of Communications for the Church of England, despite the reduction in the number of people who identified as Christian, the data still indicated that ‘the majority of the nation actively identifies the role that faith plays in their life’ (Church of England 2012). For Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association (BHA), the 14.1 million who reported no religion were ‘leading their lives with no reference to religion’, which indicated that ‘non-religious identities were on the rise’ (BHA 2012).² It is necessary for their respective arguments about the vitality or decline of religion in Britain that the Church of England and the BHA each assume that it is clear what people mean when they choose to tick ‘Christian’ or ‘no religion’ on a census. But it must also be recognised

¹ On the difference in the wording of ‘the religion question’ see Chapter One.

² ‘Humanism’ and ‘humanist’ will be used in this thesis to denote the non-religious world view that is sometimes described as ‘secular humanism’, particularly in the United States (e.g. Kurtz 2007).

that responses to census questions alone do not reveal the beliefs, belongings and behaviours that lie behind these choices.³

In order to further illuminate what is happening when respondents choose to report no religion, this thesis explores the wider lives of 23 Year 10 pupils (14- and 15-year-olds) from two non-denominational secondary schools in the West Midlands who chose to tick the ‘no religion’ box in response to the question ‘what is your religion?’ Part of the reason that the options available for responses to the religion question changed from ‘none’ in 2001 to ‘no religion’ in 2011 was to reflect how respondents choose the category affirmatively (Day & Lee 2013). In the United States, where the category of ‘none’ continues to be used in censuses and surveys, some social scientists have argued that the term is disrespectful, implying that ‘nones’ *lack* a religious affiliation (Bainbridge 2011). But a ‘none’ can also be understood simply as ‘a person who does not associate with a religion’ (Cragun & Hammer 2011:161), which is how the term is used in this thesis, holding no value judgement beyond the observation that participants did not formally affiliate themselves with an organised religion. This thesis also makes use of the term ‘none’ – describing participants as ‘young nones’ rather than, for example, ‘non-religious young people’ – because many of them did not strongly identify with non-religious stances such as atheism or agnosticism and none of them formally affiliated themselves with a non-religious organisation such as the BHA or the National Secular Society (NSS). The majority of the participants might therefore be described as ‘nones’ in relation to both religion and ‘non-religion’.

³ Anthropologist Abby Day’s (2011) study into what ‘ordinary’ people believe is a good example of how qualitative research can illuminate census data, exploring these different dimensions of religious identity. The understanding of religious identity consisting of beliefs, behaviours and belongings originated with Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism (Reuben 2011:n.p).

Sociologist Lois Lee, co-director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), defines non-religion as existing ‘primarily in a relationship of difference to religion’ (2012a:131) and ethnologist Johannes Quack advocates ‘studying the diversity of nonreligion from the bottom up’ (2014:461). Following Lee and Quack, this thesis examines participants’ constructions of religion and relationships of difference to religion. Following anthropologist Abby Day’s approach to ‘researching belief without asking religious questions’ (2009a:102), it explores what is important to participants before asking questions about religion and their reasons for reporting none. Following philosopher Charles Taylor (1989:34), identity is understood as a ‘self-interpretation’ relating to the things that matter to us. Identifying what is important in the self-interpretations of young people who report no religion, this study determines whether and how relationships of difference to religion relate to matters of importance and, therefore, how ticking the ‘no religion’ box on a questionnaire relates to issues of identity. Findings both contribute to wider understandings of what it means to be a young person of no religion and increase our knowledge of some of the reasons people choose the survey categories of ‘no religion’ or ‘none’. Examining these latter questions amongst young people rather than adult census respondents means this research can also address the need for more research with children and young adults within the emerging field of non-religion and secularity studies and contribute to debates about the inclusion of non-religious philosophies in religious education (RE).

Rationale and Research Questions

The initial impetus for my research questions came from my experience of teaching RE in state secondary schools, when I would encounter pupils who felt that they should not have to study religion because they were not religious. This complaint

became more frequent when one of the schools I worked at decided that it would introduce a mandatory ‘short course’, equivalent to half a GCSE for all pupils in Years 10 and 11, in order to fulfil its obligation to provide a certain number of hours of RE for pupils.⁴ The pupils’ objections to this development prompted me to consider possible ways in which these young people might become more engaged in the study of religion. I thought that learning more about what motivated and influenced young people who felt this way might be a helpful starting point for considering strategies for engaging pupils with their studies. However, after conducting a small-scale study that focused on non-religious RE pupils – those who identified as atheist and agnostic – I concluded that focusing on their reasons for holding such non-theistic identities, their thoughts about religion and their non-religious beliefs did not adequately address the question of whether and how these non-religious stances and understandings about religion and belief related to their wider lives beyond either the RE classroom or our interview. Furthermore, focusing specifically on young people who described themselves in these ways meant that it was not possible to examine the perspectives of pupils who had no religion but who did not share these non-theistic stances. The scope of my initial focus, therefore, failed to include the full spectrum of young nones, who form what religious educator Linda Rudge (1998) has described as the ‘silent majority’ of pupils in the RE classroom – those who identify with or as ‘nothing’, with or as none of the religions

⁴ The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification usually taken between the ages of 14 and 16. In England, RE has always been part of the state school curriculum, and schools often meet this requirement by getting all pupils to take a short exam course for GCSE. Syllabuses are decided by local authorities, but guidance on content comes from the non-statutory national framework for religious education prepared by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA 2004).

studied.⁵ More specifically, it did not allow me to examine the significance of reporting no religion or an atheist or agnostic identity in pupils' wider lives. This realisation motivated the development of a research question that could first explore what was important in participants' lives before addressing their constructions of religion and their experiences of having no religion. Rather than focusing on the non-religious identities of young people, I was now interested in understanding the multiple perspectives of a more diverse group of young people to discover what they considered to be important in life, and whether and how this was connected to their constructions of and relationships to religion.

Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis differs from a traditional format in which a discussion of literature is often confined to the literature review, followed by a methodology, research findings, analysis, discussion and conclusion. Although Chapter One surveys literature in order to provide a research context, theoretical literature as well as literature from empirical research is used to support my analysis of the findings that are presented in Chapters Four to Nine. These chapters therefore first present data, before relating this to the work of theorists from the social sciences and humanities. The use of theory to interpret findings, however, means that there is sometimes additional data presented in the latter sections of these chapters as well.

In part, this thesis seeks to explore participants' constructions of religion and the nature of the relationships of difference they have with these constructions. There have been important transformations within western society and culture that have influenced perceptions of religion and contributed to common understandings of the

⁵ This may not be true of all RE classes in multi-faith Britain, of course. There are likely to be many parts of the country where only a minority of pupils feel this way.

term. **Chapter One** therefore examines the contemporary context in which these young people live and from which popular understandings of religion have emerged, highlighting in particular why religion is often thought to consist primarily of propositional beliefs. This chapter also includes a discussion of the 2011 Census and the categories ‘no religion’ and ‘none’. It stresses the importance of understanding what researchers and participants mean by religion, and how this informs our understanding of concepts such as ‘irreligion’ (Campbell [2013]1971) and ‘non-religion’ (Lee 2012a), as well as non-theistic stances like ‘atheist’ and ‘agnostic’. For participants in this research, religious beliefs were thought to be held by people in much the same way as scientists hold beliefs about the natural world and, therefore, could and should be questioned if they are not supported by empirical evidence. This emphasis on belief in their constructions of religion was partly influenced by a ‘philosophical’ turn in RE, which Chapter One also briefly introduces. It then discusses previous research on youth and religion, arguing that here, too, some researchers have emphasised the importance of propositional belief for understanding how young people relate to religion. This emphasis is often coupled with the assumption that it is necessary for young people to have an overarching framework of meaning for their lives and that without just such a vision they will be unable to find lasting happiness or to lead meaningful lives. Part of this study therefore considers how significant such beliefs are for young people as well as whether they are in search of this type of meaning and purpose in life.

Chapter Two explains why I adopted a qualitative research strategy for this study and makes explicit the assumptions entailed in this approach to social scientific research. This is followed by discussions of the philosophical and methodological influences on my research and an explanation of my research design. In particular, I

discuss how and why photo-elicitation was incorporated into the interviews, and how this research method aided the process of understanding what was important to my participants. This chapter also includes a detailed description of the stages of fieldwork; an examination of my role in the research and relationship to the research sites that were used; consideration of the ethical issues involved in research with young people; and a justification for the types of sampling and analysis that were chosen to gather and interpret the data. **Chapter Three** briefly introduces each of the participants through an illustrative quotation from their interviews, describing their photographs and summarising what they considered to be important in life. Each of these young people are encountered again in the main findings from this research in Chapters Four to Eight.

Participants emphasised the importance of being free, being themselves, and being connected. Although at times they appeared to value their own personal freedom over the concerns of others, participants' self-interpretations were also shaped by values and commitments lying beyond themselves and were dependent on the important attachments they formed in their relationships with others. Using Taylor's account of how self-interpretation is linked with matters of importance, **Chapter Four** positions these findings in relation to notions of authenticity and 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' (1991:26). What the young people considered to be important is explored further in **Chapter Five** through an examination of how stories about past experiences and imagined futures contributed to significant narratives in their lives, especially the narrative of self-improvement. The nature of these narratives are illuminated through turning to philosopher Paul Ricoeur's three-fold mimetic process for understanding the relationship between time

and narrative, as well as to the work of other theorists who have sought to understand how narrative helps us to make sense of our lives in the present.

The following three chapters examine how what was important to participants is related to their constructions of religion and their relationships of difference to these constructions. **Chapter Six** details how religion was most often thought to consist of private and individualised propositional beliefs of a metaphysical or ethical nature that lacked enough empirical evidence to convince participants of their veracity or that were thought to restrict one's freedom to experience life. But some participants also held beliefs in life after death, the supernatural and prayer, which are treated in **Chapter Seven** as a case study for illustrating the advantages of broadening the scope of enquiry to include matters of importance. Exploring participants' lives as young people, their constructions of religion and their thoughts about and experiences of having none helps researchers to understand the apparent inconsistency of reporting no religion whilst holding beliefs adapted from religious traditions. The significance of these beliefs can be better understood when we focus on their function in participants' lives, rather than focusing on the incoherent content of these beliefs. These chapters build towards a picture of why these young people ticked 'no religion' and an exploration in **Chapter Eight** of the extent to which they are claiming an identity in ticking this box. Common-sense assumptions about what reporting no religion means – like those made by Copson – would suggest that the young people who participated in this research have non-religious identities. But it is argued that the question of whether participants expressed non-religious identities depends on the relative significance of relationships of difference to religion in participants' self-interpretations.

Chapter Nine draws together findings and analysis to present the central argument of this study, but it also demonstrates how it complements other studies that are similarly less concerned with the content of propositional beliefs and that focus instead on how beliefs function in people's lives. The **Conclusion** highlights implications of this thesis for future research in youth and religion and non-religion studies, and for the study of religion and belief in schools.

Chapter One: Research Context

Introduction

This chapter frames this thesis within the context of a number of fields of research relating to the study of young people who report no religion. It begins by examining the social and cultural milieu in which participants live and from which contemporary understandings of religion have historically emerged, which is likely to have influenced their constructions of religion, belief and non-religious belief. Key here is a discussion of the debates over secularisation as a social trend, and, since such debates are often informed by survey data, an examination of research on the categories of ‘no religion’ and ‘none’ used in the sections of censuses and questionnaires concerned with religious self-identification. The reasons respondents might tick such boxes are of interest to scholars working in the emerging field of non-religion and secularity studies, which this chapter briefly introduces alongside the concepts of ‘irreligion’ and ‘non-religion’ in particular. One of the problems with debates over secularisation is that those involved often have different understandings of what is meant by ‘religion’, but a number of studies emerging from this new field have been careful to distinguish ‘non-religion’ from other related concepts such as ‘atheism’, as well as to explore more fully what is meant by ‘religion’ in the contexts that are being studied. Some of the different ways in which religion has been defined is also briefly explored in this chapter, followed by an examination of the relationship between religion and belief, which has influenced western academic studies of religion as well as popular discourse and RE.

The young people who participated in this research all studied Religious Studies at GCSE, and may therefore have been influenced by the emphasis on the study of belief in the ‘philosophical’ turn in RE. This chapter considers whether

focusing on the content of certain types of religious belief, as well as emphasising the importance of developing pupils' critical thinking skills, is the most appropriate use of the time allocated in schools for the study of religion. Previous research on young people and religion may have also focused primarily on the importance of propositional forms of belief, as well as emphasising the search for an overarching meaning and purpose in young people's relationships to religion. Such tendencies perhaps reflect the perspectives of researchers more than their participants. In particular, the methods of data collection employed by researchers may result in the assumption that propositional beliefs and the search for meaning and purpose in life are more important for young people than is necessarily the case. This study attempts to understand what is important in the lives of young people of no religion without such presuppositions. The chapter concludes, therefore, with a brief introduction to some of the research in youth and religion that similarly seeks to avoid an overemphasis on propositional belief.

1.1 The Immanent Frame

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes how 'conditions of belief' have changed in modern western societies (2007:3). Because he is particularly interested in belief in God, he traces the various transformations that have occurred in western societies since 1500 – when it was virtually impossible not to believe in God – to the present – when, he suggests, almost the opposite is true. His analysis of the situation leads him to conclude that at present we live within what he terms the 'immanent frame'. This is 'not mainly a set of beliefs' but 'a sensed context in which we develop our beliefs' (2007:549). It 'constitutes a "natural order", to be contrasted with a "supernatural" one, an "immanent" world, over against a possible "transcendent" one' (2007:542). Since the Enlightenment, the increasing influence of the natural sciences has helped

create what Taylor describes as a ‘powerful picture’ that prevents us from seeing ‘important aspects of reality’. The rise of science has meant that for many people today it is the scientific view of the immanent world that has become ‘obvious’ (2007:551). This all-pervasive view of the world has influenced the popular understanding of the difference between science and religion, which distinguishes between the natural, material and rational world epitomised by the achievements of science, medicine and technology, and the supernatural, immaterial and irrational world of spirituality and religion. The possibility of an alternative view of life – one which would be open to Taylor’s understanding of the transcendent – is almost impossible to imagine.

This distinction between science and religion is also central to what sociologist Max Weber (1993[1920]) described as the gradual ‘disenchantment’ of the world, forming part of his secularisation thesis, which ‘posits that the rise of new forms of rationality, embodied in science and technology, challenges more traditional forms including religious belief systems’ (Madge *et al.* 2014:3). Since the 1960s, this thesis has shaped debates between sociologists about the decline, revival or transformation of religion in contemporary western society. Initially, it was argued that religion was likely to disappear, as it ceased to be of significance in the lives of individuals (Berger 1969). More recently, although the influence of religion on certain sectors within some societies may well have diminished, the extent to which this has also affected individuals has been questioned (Wilson 1985), and a number of theorists have argued that there is evidence to suggest that religious belief and practice has flourished in recent years (Davie 1999; Martin 2005). These secularisation or de-secularisation theories have, according to sociologist Linda

Woodhead, become the ‘dominant framework’ for thinking about religion in post-war Britain (2012:2).

But for others, secularisation has ‘given rise to the possibility of a post-secular society’. For sociologists Enzo Pace, Luigi Berzano, and Giuseppe Giordan, the ‘individualization of believing’ and the ‘culture of the self’ has had a significant effect on contemporary expressions of religiosity, which will become important for discussions in later chapters of this thesis. The move away from external institutional sources of authority to ‘subjective authenticity’ or what they describe as ‘the shift from exteriority to interiority’ may well have influenced decline in religious participation but it would also seem to have resulted in a transformation of rather than decline in expressions of religious belief. While processes of secularisation are therefore ‘still present and operating inside the post-secular epoch’, they have had ‘religious effects’, which results in the ‘paradox’ of living ‘within and beyond secularization’ (2010:viii-ix). This might mean that although sociologists such as David Voas and Alasdair Crockett (2005) and historians like Callum Brown (2000) have argued that decline in religious practice will eventually be followed by decline in religious belief, this may take longer than predicted as people continue to hold what might be described as ‘religious’ beliefs even though they wish to distance themselves from the authority of religious institutions (Davie 1994).

A further and more fundamental problem with these debates concerns differences in what is meant by ‘religion’ or ‘the secular’. Religion scholar Timothy Fitzgerald argues that they are ‘mutually delimiting and defining concepts, the distinction between them continually shifting depending on the context’ (2007a:15). Woodhead observes that the meaning of these concepts has been ‘bound up with particular political struggles, interests and social shifts’ (2012:24) and such

complexities lead sociologist James Beckford to conclude that those involved in debates about secularisation often ‘conceive of religion and its decline in radically divergent and incompatible ways’ (2003:68). However, the assumption that decline or revival of religion within a society can be accurately measured remains influential within the sociology of religion, and survey data, including results from censuses, is often used within debates about the vitality of religion in modern societies. One problem with census data in particular, however, is that there is only one religion question; there are no subsidiary questions that further probe what respondents mean when they answer it.

1.2 The 2011 Census

All of the young people who participated in this research chose to tick the ‘no religion’ box in response to the religion question taken from the 2011 Census.⁶ For Copson, the census data was self-evident: those who reported no religion were ‘leading their lives with no reference to religion’ and the numbers meant that ‘non-religious identities were on the rise’ (BHA 2012). His remarks presupposed that people ticked this box because religion was of no relevance to their lives, or that they did so because religion was important enough to construct a non-religious rather than religious identity. However, Day and Lee question whether actively choosing to report ‘no religion’ necessarily indicated that religion was of no relevance to respondents (Day & Lee 2013). Day, who was part of the advisory board for questions about religion and identity, noted that part of the reason for changing the ‘none’ option to ‘no religion’ was ‘to make it clearer that this category is chosen

⁶ This question followed the wording of the Census question verbatim, so participants were presented with the options: ‘No religion, Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations), Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Any other religion, write in’ (ONS 2011).

affirmatively by respondents' (in Day & Lee 2013:n.p.). It is also worth noting that 7.2 per cent (4 million) chose not to answer the religion question (ONS 2012).⁷ As Lee observed, actively choosing to tick the 'no religion' box is therefore different from what she refers to as the 'real opt-out category in the census, which involved declining to answer this (voluntary) question at all' (in Day & Lee 2013:n.p.).

Some census respondents might have felt that their rejection of religious beliefs and practices, or their objection to the influence and power of religious institutions, was important enough to their lives to affiliate themselves with a non-religious campaign group such as the BHA or the NSS. Seeking solidarity with like-minded individuals by joining such organisations might provide some respondents with a stronger sense of a non-religious identity than that held, for example, by those who ticked 'no religion' because they no longer attend church on Sundays or have doubts about the existence of God. Furthermore, assuming that all respondents tick this box to indicate that religion is important enough for them to form an identity in opposition to it ignores the possibility that people might consider religion to be important in their lives while at the same time not wishing to be affiliated with any of the religions listed. Reference to religion may well remain a significant part of life beyond the construction of non-religious identities in opposition to it. The BHA's characterisation of those who tick 'no religion' may seem self-evident, but they do not take account of the diversity and complexity of relationships to religion held by people who report none.

⁷ Each of these figures has been rounded to the nearest hundred thousand. There are many reasons why people might decide not to answer this question and, as religion scholar Clive Field has argued, it would be 'dangerous to assume that "religion not stated" can be equated with "no religion"' (2012:n.p.).

1.3 ‘No Religion’ and ‘Nones’

As many scholars of religion have observed, there is an important difference between claiming or not claiming a religious affiliation on a census or questionnaire and holding religious or non-religious beliefs (Vernon 1968; Davie 1994; Harrison 2007; Baker & Smith 2009; Bainbridge 2011; Cragun & Hammer 2011; Day 2011; Lee 2014). Although decline in religious participation may well be followed by the decline in religious belief, sociologist Grace Davie (1994) has argued that affiliation alone is not an accurate measure of religiosity because it does not take account of those people who hold religious beliefs but do not consider themselves to be part of a religious tradition. As philosopher of religion Victoria Harrison has argued, many people without affiliation ‘not only hold on to their religious beliefs but also typically retain a sense of religious identity’. It therefore seems ‘counter-intuitive...to regard a devout believer as irreligious simply because she eschews membership of a religious institution’ (2007:243).

Similar arguments have been made in the United States, where the term ‘none’ is used to describe those with no religious affiliation. There, some have argued that the term serves primarily as a ‘function of survey method rather than a self-description’ (Pasquale 2007:n.p.). The difference between religious and non-religious survey categories is worth noting. As Lee observes, religious categories such as ‘Christian’ or ‘Hindu’ might act as a ‘cultural marker’ with which a respondent is familiar, allowing them ‘to share an emic representation’, whereas ‘generic nonreligious options seem to be etic categories, used to locate the remaining individuals inside an analytical rather than a phenomenological framework’ (2014:466). The term ‘none’ emerged within the social sciences to categorise those ‘lacking religious faith’ who, unlike atheists and agnostics, were ‘not associated with

any well-developed philosophical position' (Bainbridge 2011:320). It was a 'value-laden term' (Cragun & Hammer 2011:160) used to describe those who were, as sociologist William Sims Bainbridge notes, 'often disrespectfully called the "nones", a pun on "nuns", because when asked what religion they belong to, they say "none"' (2011:320). But this category can also include those who have no religious affiliation but who are, according to social scientist Glenn Vernon, 'on certain religious measures ... more "religious" than some of those categorized as affiliated' (1968:223). But sociologists Ryan Cragun and Joseph Hammer argue that the term need not be considered a disrespectful or inaccurate description, but they suggest drawing a distinction between 'religious nones' and 'nones' to better understand the diversity within the category. They note that "'[r]eligious nones" could be highly orthodox in their religious beliefs but simply choose not to associate with a religious body' or they might 'fall into the "spiritual but not religious" category that is gaining popularity' (2011:160). In contrast, a 'none' is simply 'a person who does not associate with a religion' (2011:161), which is how the term is utilised in this thesis. The young people who participated in this study wished to indicate their non-association with a religion by ticking the 'no religion' box. However, this did not mean that they did not also adapt beliefs from religious traditions. Additionally, a number of them were 'nones' in relation to non-religious identifications and affiliations.

The research of these and other scholars (Hout & Fischer 2002; Bullivant 2008) demonstrates that there is likely to be great diversity within the category of 'nones' and those who tick the 'no religion' box. Making concrete claims about the religious or non-religious dispositions of people within this category is therefore problematic, without further investigative research and analysis. In addition, it might

also be the case that people who lead lives with ‘no reference to religion’ also choose to report one of the religions listed on a census or questionnaire since, as Cragun and Hammer note, ‘there are varying levels of religious commitment among those who identify with a religion’ (2011:166). This is evident in Day’s research on the function of belief in the lives of people living in the north of England, which included a number of respondents who ticked the ‘Christian’ box. For some of them, being a Christian was ‘an ascribed identity’ that was ‘conferred upon them at birth’ but that had ‘not engaged them often in later life’ (2011:182). There were others who equated ‘Christian’ with ‘Englishness’ (2011:187) or who equated being a Christian with becoming ‘successful, respectable, and happy’ (2011:188). For many of Day’s informants, then, religion was not particularly relevant to their day-to-day lives but they still chose to describe themselves as ‘Christian’ by ticking this box. Understanding why people tick the ‘no religion’ box on a census or questionnaire might therefore require encouraging deeper reflection amongst respondents, since it might function as an indicator of another more significant aspect of their lives, just as ticking ‘Christian’ did for Day’s respondents.

Census and survey data on religion is valuable for discussions of general trends within society, but it does not help us understand what respondents actually mean when they choose to identify in a particular way. Respondents’ answers depend upon what they understand religion to be at that moment in time, which in turn, as Day’s research suggests, is determined by both past experiences and aspirations in life. But responses to census or survey questions alone do not enable researchers to penetrate this particular understanding of religion; it cannot be retrospectively determined from the respondent’s answer. The analysis of such data can help us understand how people respond to questions of self-identification, belief and value

but, as quantitative researchers themselves acknowledge, a possible ‘weakness’ of the types of study based on these data is that it may be ‘difficult to penetrate behind the well-framed questions to establish the deeper underlying meaning’ (Francis & Robbins 2005:3).

1.4 Understanding ‘Religion’

Understanding what census and questionnaire respondents understand by ‘religion’ is difficult because, although at first the term might seem familiar, it is often, on closer inspection, more difficult to grasp. For religion scholar Willi Braun, our familiarity with the concept means that many people feel they ‘do not need to have studied religion in order to think they know what it is’. These ‘popular understandings of religion’, combined with the many ‘definitional offerings of scholars’, results in religion acting as ‘a “floating signifier” capable of attaching itself to a dizzying range of objects’ (2000:4-5).

Religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that during the nineteenth century, religion was widely understood as ‘a something with a definite and fixed form’ (1991:47). Attempts to discover what this ‘something’ might be led to two distinct approaches to defining the concept within the social sciences. Scholars either sought to define religion substantively, such as the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, who assumed that religion should be understood based on its content and defined it as ‘the belief in spiritual beings’ (Tylor 1871; in Lambek 2008:25), or chose to emphasise instead how religions functioned for individuals and society. Rather than focus on *what* is believed by followers of religious traditions, the latter approach defines religion in terms of *how* they believe it; in other words, it is more concerned with the role that belief plays in people’s lives. Representative of this functional approach is sociologist Emile Durkheim, who defined religion as ‘beliefs

and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim 1912; in Lambek 2008:45). As sociologist Adam Possamai notes, for Durkheim, religion 'was seen to act as a social glue that held everyone within a specific society together around these sacred things' (2009:44).

For historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, religion should be understood as 'a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore theirs to define' (1998:281-2). But, for religion scholar Malory Nye, academic definitions of religion 'tend to narrow down our options' and should instead be understood simply as 'a useful starting point', rather than leading us 'to assume that we "know" our subject before we even start looking at it'. Nye argues, therefore, that a further 'problem' with the approach of scholars such as Smith is 'that the word "religion" is (of course) frequently used well beyond academic life' (2008:18). Beckford also highlights the difference between religion as it is understood within the academy and as it is understood by religious practitioners, drawing a distinction between "'first-order" notions of religion that actors deploy in everyday life and the "second-order" constructs that serve analytical purposes' (2003:7). Possamai argues that 'truly' defining what religion is 'would take an extremely high degree of abstraction that no human being could meet' (2009:19). It is therefore more helpful to focus on the 'historical and cultural changes that make believers and non-believers change their understanding of what religion and spirituality are' than attempt to reach 'an ontological understanding of religion' (2009:23). Rather than 'a fixed or unitary phenomenon ... religion is a social construct that varies in meaning across time and place' (Beckford 2003:7). It is a 'social phenomenon' that could not 'exist independently of human actors and social institutions' (2003:4). An awareness of the

social contexts in which it is being used greatly aids our understanding of the concept.

As one of the objectives of this study is to understand the diverse relationships to religion that young people of no religion have, more emphasis is placed on the first-order understandings of religion that the participants shared with me in their interviews than the second-order concepts that scholars use. By focusing on what the young people say about their lives, including the ways they construct what they mean by ‘religion’ and how they understand their relationship to it, this thesis seeks to understand what having *no* religion means to them and how their constructions of religion and non-religion might further academic understandings of both. Such a focus on participants’ constructions of religion is evident in a number of recent studies of non-religion.

1.5 Irreligion and Non-Religion

Theologian Stephen Bullivant and Lee, co-directors of the NSRN, note that many social scientists studying non-religion and secularity begin by ‘bemoaning the dearth of previous research’ (2012:19). The research that had been conducted generally focused on the *absence of religion* rather than on the *presence* and nature of *non-religion*. However, Lee argues that part of the significance of Colin Campbell’s (2013[1971]) *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was that, unlike other studies of secularisation during the 1960s and 70s, Campbell studied not the absence of religion but the presence of what he called ‘irreligion’ as ‘a response to religion’ (Lee 2013:xxi). As Campbell writes, ‘irreligion as a social and cultural phenomenon is worthy of serious investigation, independent of any light which such investigations may shed on the future of religion or the secularization thesis’ (2013:7). But his study of irreligion was also significant because it emphasised the importance of its

relationship of difference to religion, such that irreligion should be understood ‘as amorphous and shifting an object as religion is’ (Lee 2013:xxi). As Campbell writes, ‘irreligion cannot be defined substantively in terms of identifiable beliefs and practices but only as a general form of response to religion, the content of the irreligious response itself varying as the content of religion varies’ (2013[1971]:20).

Campbell notes that part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of ‘irreligion’ includes ‘indifference’ and ‘hostility’ towards religion (2013[1971]:24) and that both attitudes require a ‘minimal awareness’ of religion, which for people living in contemporary society is inevitable, considering ‘all-penetrating mass media make some acquaintance with the predominant religion unavoidable’ (2013[1971]:24). For Campbell, both of these stances imply ‘rejection’ of religion, and this is ‘irreligion’s principal defining characteristic’ (2013[1971]:26). But Lee argues that it is necessary to ‘extend Campbell’s sociology beyond an exclusive focus on irreligion’ towards the study of non-religion which ‘is inclusive of more stable and less antagonistic modes, positions and practices’ (Lee 2013:xxvi). Lee offers a provisional definition of ‘non-religion’ as ‘anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion’ (2012a:131). A key difference between non-religion and ‘other aspects of the secular’, is that

Non-religion is primarily defined in reference to religion, whereas the secular is primarily defined by something other than religion. Non-religion is a relational concept; the secular is purely relative. Non-religion is ‘stuff’; the secular means only the demotion or absence of some other ‘stuff’ – the relevance of religion as a variable (2012:136).

As an umbrella term for anything that is not, on the one hand, ‘religion’ or, on the other, ‘a-religious’ (having no relationship to religion) or ‘secular’ (being primarily

defined by something other than religion), Lee suggests that ‘non-religion’ includes atheism, agnosticism or humanism but is also broader than these positions. It includes anti-religious beliefs and activities as well as ‘indifference towards religion – a stance which requires at least some awareness of religion and therefore taking some position’ (2012a:131). Non-religion is, Lee suggests, ‘a working concept that should be useful as long as the concept of religion is’ (2012a:133), making it a relational term, dependent upon the task of defining ‘religion’. Religion and non-religion are ‘semantically parasitic categories’ (Fitzgerald 2007b:52). The concept of non-religion is examined further in Chapter Seven, where participants’ relationships to their constructions of religion are explored in detail.

1.6 Theism and Non-Theism

Many of the young people who participated in this research held some of the non-theistic positions described by Lee, and an important part of the reason they chose to tick the ‘no religion’ box on their questionnaires was that they disbelieved or lacked a belief in, or were unsure of what to believe about, God. Just as part of this thesis is concerned with participants’ understandings of religion, it is also concerned with examining how atheism and agnosticism were understood by participants and what their atheist or agnostic stances meant to them. Like religion, atheism and agnosticism have been variously defined by scholars and, like non-religion, they are relational terms. Philosopher Michael Martin draws a distinction between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ forms of atheism. Whereas negative atheism is ‘the absence of belief in any god or Gods’, positive atheism is more broadly defined as ‘disbelief in all gods’ or, more narrowly, ‘disbelief in a theistic God’ (2007:2). Bullivant notes that the ‘classic’ definition of an agnostic is someone who ‘believes that it is impossible to know whether or not there is a God’ (2008:366). But, although a ‘common view is

that it is nothing more than ticking the “don’t know” box on the question of God’s existence’, philosopher Robin Le Poidevin prefers to characterise an agnostic as someone for whom ‘doubts about once unquestioned beliefs’ are neither replaced with a ‘confident reaffirmation of those beliefs or else an equally confident rejection of them’ (2010:2,6).

These distinctions are useful for understanding why participants adopted these self-descriptors but it is also necessary to understand how they related atheism and agnosticism to theism and their constructions of ‘God’. As Martin observes, even within the ‘modern western context’, the term atheism ‘has meant different things’ and this has been dependent on ‘changing conceptions of God’ (2007:1). It is also dependent upon assumptions that theism as belief in God is of central importance to Christians and other monotheists and that religious adherents hold this belief in much the same way as scientists hold beliefs about the material world. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon to understand God as a ‘being’ or ‘thing’ in the world that could be described in much the same way as other beings or things. But this was a very different view of God from the understanding of pre-modern scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, for whom God’s transcendence means that there is a distance between creator and creature, between the divine and the human (Hyman 2007:41; Turner 2002:18). According to theologian Denys Turner, it is the incommensurability of God’s being or thingness and other beings and things that many modern atheists fail to grasp – evident in some of the criticisms of religion that are voiced by members of non-religious campaign groups such as the BHA and in the polemical work of those authors that have been described as the ‘New Atheists’ (Wolf 2006).

It is of course important for the arguments of the New Atheists to assume that Christians and other monotheists believe in a powerful being and that such a belief is equivalent to a scientific hypothesis that can be proved true or false based on the presence or absence of empirical evidence. Such assumptions make it easier to construct religion and religious belief as ‘irrational’. And this understanding of religion as belief in a particular conception of God is of course not confined to the works of the New Atheists; for many people living in modern western European societies that accept the scientific view of the immanent world as obvious, this has become the common understanding of religion – one that is reinforced whenever it is presented as primarily concerned with the content and truth-value of propositional belief.

1.7 The ‘Philosophical’ Turn in RE

These popular assumptions about the nature of religion are also prominent in the study of religion in schools. Questions about religious beliefs and how these affect the ways religious people behave have recently dominated many RE syllabuses, especially at GCSE and A-Level.⁸ This privileging of belief has meant that pupils have been tested on their ability to critique religious truth claims and on their knowledge of how religious adherents should live and act. When I was teaching RE in secondary schools, I had to prepare pupils to answer the following types of questions, which have been taken from the three main exam boards in England at that time:

Explain why some people say that religious revelation is only an illusion.⁹

⁸ The Advanced Certificate in Education or ‘A-Level’ is a post-compulsory academic qualification usually taken between the ages of 16 and 18.

⁹ AQA GCSE Religious Studies Short Course Specification A, June 2010.

Explain why most Christians are against euthanasia.¹⁰

Do you think the universe is designed? Give two reasons for your point of view.¹¹

Explain why some creationists do not believe in the Big Bang theory.¹²

Although it might help pupils develop their critical thinking skills, this approach to the study of religion seems to reinforce the notion that religion is concerned with private, individualised beliefs of an ontological, epistemological and/or moral nature. It does not provide room for pupils to consider how religion might be broader than assent to propositional beliefs. Nor does it enable them to explore further the nature of belief and how it might function in everyday life, including their own.

This philosophical turn is partly due to the influence of Andrew Wright's religious education pedagogy. This approach differed from the 'experiential-expressive model' to the study of religion, which, Wright argues, meant pupils were being taught that 'all religious traditions' embody 'equally valid expressions of a common religious experience'.¹³ He thought that this model of RE ignored doctrinal differences between the various religious traditions and suggested that they possessed no 'inherent cognitive significance'. In order to prevent RE from losing its theological content, he argued that RE should offer pupils a 'theology concerned with questions of ultimate truth' that enabled them to 'explore conflicting world views rather than inducting them into a single paradigm'. Wright's pedagogy

¹⁰ Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies Religion and Life, May 2010.

¹¹ Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies Religion and Life, May 2010.

¹² OCR Advanced Subsidiary GCE January 2011.

¹³ The spiritual turn within RE towards the end of the 1980s was influenced by the work of researchers at Nottingham University on the *Religious Experience and Education Project* (Cf. Hammond *et al.* 1990; Grimmit 2000; Hay & Nye 2006).

emphasises the importance of the search for truth in the study of religion, likening it to the way scientists approach the material world: 'This is the best sense we can make of reality at present. Now let's see if we can achieve anything better' (2000:172-3). Whilst aware of the importance of the experiential dimension to religion, he considered the experiential-expressive model of RE to be too introspective. By placing too much emphasis on 'feelings' and 'spirituality', pupils were not being given the opportunity to engage their critical faculties to assess the truth claims made by religious traditions. He argues that if religious belief has been 'privatized' and 'is purely subjective', it 'can make no claim to public knowledge' and 'the process of evaluation becomes an impossible one'. There are 'no public criteria on which to make judgements' and 'pupils can only express a personal preference' (1993:76).

For Wright, the core of Christianity is the 'belief in God's revelation in becoming human in the incarnation', not the 'religious experience of Christians'. However, he also argues that truth claims are of central importance to all other religions:

The heart of religion lies, then, in the claims to truth it makes about the objective nature of the universe and the place of society and individuals within this world view. To reach a depth of understanding of religion thus involves not achieving insight into religious experience, but reaching an understanding of the world view a religion holds, of its specific claims to religious truth. It is the teaching of religions, their concrete beliefs, and the question of the coherence and truth of these claims that marks the heart of religion, as it is understood by believers themselves (1993:72).

While this understanding of religion may certainly be held by some followers of a creedal religion such as Christianity, there are likely to be many others who do not consider truth claims to be the most important aspect of their religious lives. This emphasis on the importance of studying belief and truth in RE would seem to risk offering a narrow understanding of religion and misrepresenting the diversity within religious traditions. Developing skills to evaluate religious truth claims may convince pupils both that they are essential for the study of religion and that a certain type of propositional belief is of central importance for all religious adherents. By focusing on those aspects of religion that might be used in order to hone pupils' critical thinking skills, Wright's recommendations for an emphasis on the exploration and critique of religious beliefs and truth claims may have made it a more academically respectable subject to study at GCSE and A-Level, but it is also likely to have affected the way religion is understood by pupils. By emphasising the importance of the philosophical and ethical dimensions of religion, the Philosophy and Ethics strand of Religious Studies syllabuses seems to have occluded the more experiential, relational and practical elements of religious traditions.¹⁴ If RE is chiefly concerned with enabling pupils to rationally decide whether they should assent to religious truth claims as if they were equivalent to scientific propositions, then it is more likely that pupils will view religions as philosophical systems that describe the way things are than as ways of living.

The importance of developing critical thinking skills would seem to be central also to the arguments of those who have sought to include non-religious

¹⁴ Changes made by the Department for Education indicate that the study of religion at GCSE will have a slightly wider focus from 2016. As well as 'beliefs and teachings', pupils following GCSE Religious Studies syllabuses will also study religious 'practices', 'sources of wisdom and authority' and 'forms of expression and ways of life' (Department for Education 2015a).

belief systems like humanism into the RE curriculum. Some of the problems with these proposals are discussed in more detail in the Conclusion, where they are considered in light of the findings from this research and in relation to studies on the nature of belief within the field of youth and religion.

1.8 Studies of Youth and Religion

During the 1970s and 1980s, social scientific study of youth was mostly concerned with ‘youth unemployment, youth subcultures, new social movements and cultural resistance to aspects of capitalism’ (Beckford 2010: xxiii). But more recently there has been an increased interest in the study of youth and religion, with researchers seeking to identify what animates the lives of young people today. Within this field of study, rather than viewing ‘being young as a fixed and uniform stage of the life-cycle’ (2010:xxiv), researchers have located young people in their various historical contexts, leading to the study of religion and youth in relation to the differing characteristics of their generational cohorts: for example, ‘Generation X’ (those born in the 1960s and 70s) or ‘Generation Y’ (those born in the 1980s and 90s).¹⁵ As with any broad generalisation, there are of course likely to be those who do not fit with a particular characterisation (Voas 2010:27-8). In recognition of this problem, sociologists of religion often use these labels to describe a particularly prevalent attitude to life during these times. Given these caveats, however, participants for this research (all born in 1997 and 1998) could be categorised as ‘Generation Y’ or ‘the Millennial Generation’ (Howe & Strauss 2000:6).

¹⁵ Possamai explains that there is ‘no strong agreement on dates in the literature’, but ‘for argument sake’ suggests that ‘Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 whereas generation Xers were born between 1965 and 1980; followed by the Y generation between 1981 and 2000’ (2009:2).

Studies of the ways in which Generation Y experiences life illustrate this cohort's inheritance of several attitudes, beliefs and influences from Generation X. While Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) grew up during a time of significant political and social change and were likely to be searching for a metaphysical meaning to life, researchers more often characterise Generation X – who grew up amidst rising divorce rates, the threat of AIDS, environmental disasters and nuclear war, and were even less certain of their future than the preceding generation – as being more concerned with meanings derived from their relationships with family and friends. For theologian Tom Beaudoin, popular culture had a significant influence on this generational cohort's search for meaning. Media and fashion filled a 'spiritual gap' in the lives of young people who had a 'fragmented or completely broken relationship to "formal" or "institutional" religion' (1998:21). While they may have looked to popular culture as a source of spiritual significance rather than to either religion or their parents, religion continued to have significance for Generation X, as evidenced by the presence of religious imagery in music videos and the appropriation of religious symbols in fashion. But the argument that Generation X used popular culture to create religious meaning and significance in life has not gone unchallenged. For theologian and sociologist Gordon Lynch (2002), popular 'texts' such as music videos can have multiple interpretations, and the religious significance that a scholar such as Beaudoin is able to discern in them would be very different from the majority of consumers of such cultural artefacts. Lynch argues that studying the way young people actually interact with music and fashion rather than analysing and interpreting the meaning of 'texts' such as music videos, can give 'a clearer picture of how and to what extent individuals use popular culture to make sense of life' (2002:68).

Although there has been less research carried out on the world views of Generation Y, recent studies of contemporary teenagers and young adults suggest that the interest in popular culture and the concern over relationships with and meanings derived from family and friends continue to be of central importance for post-Generation X cohorts (Savage *et al.* 2006; Mason *et al.* 2007). In Britain, Generation Y spends millions of pounds each year on fashion, music and film, and although they might be deriving *meaning* from popular culture, they are not necessarily drawing on it for *religious* significance. For Beaudoin and sociologist Sylvia Collins-Mayo, the fact that very few young people attend church on Sundays suggests that ‘the legacy of Christianity passed on to GenYers is even more slight than for GenX’ (2010:22-3). If fewer young people are turning to religion to help make their lives meaningful, researchers assume that they are searching for meaning and purpose beyond religion. But this search for purpose in life is not necessarily the same search for the meaning of life that was thought to preoccupy previous generations.

For many young people, a meaningful existence can be found in the pursuit of happiness. This is reflected in the findings of recent qualitative studies in the United States and Australia. Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton’s (2005) study, for example, identified what they call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ as the framework for meaning and purpose in the lives of American teenagers, a world view in which ‘being good and feeling good’ is the central goal of life (Smith 2010:44). For Smith and Denton, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has become ‘the *de facto* dominant religion among contemporary teenagers in the USA’ (Smith 2010:41). Many of the 250 young Americans aged between 13 and 17 that were interviewed spoke in therapeutic rather than religious terms about their beliefs.

Although many believed in God, they did not think that he needed to be particularly involved in their lives except when it is necessary to resolve a problem. If they behaved well and treated each other well, they believed that they would be rewarded in heaven. What was most important for these teenagers was that they were happy. Feeling happy is ‘the dominant epistemological framework and evaluative standard for most contemporary US teenagers’ (2010:44). Despite the continued influence of Christianity on the lives of young people in America, Smith is concerned that the dominance of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism means ‘Christianity is degenerating into a pathetic version of itself’, or is being ‘actively colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith’ (2010:46).

Sociologist Michael Mason, one of the authors of a recent study of young Australians entitled *The Spirit of Generation Y* (see Mason *et al.* 2007), expresses a slightly different concern. This project focused on the views of 1,219 young people born between 1981 and 1995, and suggested that ‘the level of interest in and involvement with religion or spirituality of any kind among Gen Y was low’. What was most important for these young people were ‘close relationships with friends and family, an exciting life and helping others. They also wanted a peaceful, cooperative, just and secure world and care for the environment’. But Mason is concerned that his participants refer to their ‘opinions’ rather than their ‘beliefs’, and that this included all but a few of the committed Christians in his sample. Furthermore, he laments that most of them have ‘no overarching vision, whether religious or secular, inspiring them and shaping their lives’ (2010:57).

In both of these studies, the researchers appear to have already decided what is important in life – namely, beliefs and systems of meaning. They then express concern that young people today are not able to recognise this. The expectation that

young people should have an overarching vision and that without it their lives are deficient seems to reveal more about the researcher than about the participants. Some of the assumptions made within these contemporary studies of Generation Y are similar to those Lynch identifies within Generation X literature. He observes that the search for meaning is something that characterises literature on Generation X, ‘particularly in its more populist pastoral and missiological forms’ (2010:37). But he also notes that it is worth considering the extent to which the significance of belief, meaning and purpose emerges from the data or is imposed upon it by researchers. Lynch writes:

The Augustinian maxim (refracted through humanist and existential psychology) that the human heart is restless and unfulfilled unless it finds some core meaning in life can be seen in the assumption that if members of Generation X tended to be alienated from institutional religion then they must necessarily be looking for sources of meaning elsewhere (i.e. in media and popular culture). Underlying this assumption – and much contemporary literature on spirituality – is an unquestioned view of the importance of metaphysical belief for individuals (2010:37).

Smith and Mason appear to bemoan their participants’ loss of belief or lack of spirituality, but the importance their interviewees place on being happy, maintaining relationships and leading exciting lives are all worth exploring further. The interest young people have in popular culture, forming meaningful relationships, caring for the environment, and leading exciting lives is important in and of itself, and it is not necessarily something lamentable if *religious* significance is not being attached to these things. If, as Lynch argues, the ‘assent to metaphysical or existential beliefs may play a relatively unimportant role in the day-to-day conduct of many young

people's lives' (2010:38), it does not mean that there is necessarily something lacking from these lives. It may mean, however, that studies that focus on beliefs, or on what young people think about meaning and purpose, are unlikely to discover what young people actually experience as important in life. The studies of youth and religion so far surveyed suggest that young nones find meaning and purpose elsewhere, notably in contemporary culture. This implies, however, both that religion is primarily a source of meaning and purpose (from which only some young people draw), and that young people, whether religious or not, undertake a search for these things. Instead of arguing that young people should necessarily be searching for meaning and purpose, or that they should be interested in asking questions about beliefs and values, it is perhaps more pertinent to explore what it is that emerges as of central significance in their lives.

1.9 Researching beyond Belief

The assumption of a necessary relation between young people and the search for meaningful belief is perhaps reinforced by many of the methods used in conducting research with young people. For example, surveys which invite participants to respond to statements of belief using a Likert scale, such as *The Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales* (Francis & Kay 1995; Francis & Robbins 2005; Robbins & Francis 2010), encourage young people to foreground their assent or dissent in relation to the content of beliefs that may or may not be central to their everyday lives. Equally, interview-based studies, such as those introduced above, require participants to express themselves verbally in ways that often take the form of propositional beliefs. As Day and Lynch argue, it is important to recognise that being able to articulate propositional beliefs about God may not be the only way in which young people express their religious faith. They observe that the 'inarticulacy'

that Smith and Denton criticise has been interpreted ‘as evidence of some form of cultural deficit on respondents’ part or evidence of apophatic spirituality’. But it might actually be a consequence of the approach taken by the researchers to young people’s beliefs, ‘pointing to the limited usefulness of the concept of propositional belief for analysing contemporary religiosity’. It is therefore important to be aware that ‘belief in the religious lives of young people today takes a much wider range of forms than this’ (Day & Lynch 2013:200).

Such awareness is evident in more recent studies of the world views and faiths of young people in Britain today. These have focused on religious and non-religious beliefs, but have sought to avoid privileging the type of propositional belief that is often found in this field of research. In Chapter Nine, my findings are related to two recent studies by social scientists and theologians on the ‘world views’ and ‘faith’ of Generation Y (Savage *et al.*, 2006; Collins-Mayo *et al.*, 2010). But before presenting the methodology for this thesis, it will be helpful to briefly discuss two other studies that adopted similar methods for exploring the beliefs of young people of no religion and that therefore form part of the context for this project.

Sociologists Rebecca Catto and Janet Eccles’ study of ‘how beliefs work in the lives of young atheists’ examines the construction of belief narratives in the lives of young adults (2013:39). Their interviews with 24 respondents aged between 18 and 25 (13 male and 11 female) were based on the information provided by personal profiles written by their participants. They did not have a fixed set of interview questions, which gave them more time for freely discussing their participants’ personal narratives, and adopting this approach provided them with a more encompassing understanding of the young people’s beliefs, which Catto and Eccles describe as ‘performative’. They concluded that non-religious beliefs were not

simply propositional but rather ‘formed and performed through relationships, bound up with emotions, and shaped by social and cultural structures creating a simultaneous sense of belonging and distancing from religious “others”’ (2013:41). Although their study was focused on young adults who described themselves as atheists, my research into younger people of no religion similarly attempts to avoid privileging propositional belief. I also seek to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ lives – through integrating the photo-elicitation method into my interviews, a decision which is detailed in the following chapter. This approach helped me to learn more about what the participants considered to be important in their lives, which enabled me not only to more fully understand their constructions of religion and experiences of having none but to better comprehend how belief functioned in their lives.

The performative nature and function of belief is also examined in Day’s (2009a;2009b;2011) research. Introducing herself to participants as a social sciences researcher rather than a researcher of religion, Day began her interviews by asking people ‘what do you believe in?’ rather than ‘what is your religion?’ It was only at the very end of her interviews that she raised the topic of religious identity in connection with the census. This approach enabled her to focus on belief without asking religious questions. By focusing instead on their values, as well as what was important to her participants, she was able to learn much more about how belief functioned in their lives rather than assume that the propositional content of belief is what really matters to participants. More in-depth qualitative explorations of how ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are understood by research participants would therefore help us to appreciate how, for example, a Christian self-identity might consist of much

more than propositional beliefs and values, as well as providing us with a more nuanced interpretation of what it means to have no religion.

As well as interviewing adult respondents of the 2001 Census, Day's research also offers valuable insights into some of the reasons young British people choose to adopt a 'Christian' identity when surveyed. Amongst the 11 boys and 13 girls aged between 14 and 18 years of age that she interviewed, a Christian identity served as a 'social marker' that helped them to feel secure within their communities, creating a boundary between themselves and others. In one interview, a 14-year-old boy – who Day named 'Jordan' and whom she describes as an 'unbelieving Christian' – stated 'I don't believe in any religions'. However, he also identified as 'Christian' because 'on my birth certificate it says I'm Christian'. Day explains that 'Christian' does not mean much for Jordan, that he does not do anything that is typically 'Christian', and that his understanding of a Christian is 'someone who believes in God and Jesus and Bible and stuff'. Although he did not share these particular beliefs, Jordan had many others, which included 'doing well at school, helping at home, being with his friends' (2009b:266-7). Day's exploration of the varied beliefs of young people like Jordan demonstrates how in-depth qualitative research can illuminate the various ways belief functions in the everyday lives of young people. It also provides a welcome corrective to an understanding of belief as primarily propositional and Christian.

Both of these recent studies of young people and belief demonstrate that, in order to more fully understand how belief functions in young people's lives, researchers need to move beyond a narrow conceptualisation of belief as propositional. Listening to participants' experiences of life and the narratives they share can not only help us to better understand the role beliefs play in their lives but can also aid our understanding of the nature and function of these beliefs.

Conclusion

By exploring the social and cultural milieu in which my participants live, this chapter has provided context for my study of what is important in the lives of these young people of no religion. As is discussed in Chapters Six to Nine, the influence of living within what Taylor has described as an immanent frame influenced what they thought about religion and their reasons for having none. This study focuses specifically on what is important to my participants and how this relates to their relationships of difference to religion, and does not aim to generalise about what is meant by having no religion. But by surveying the literature on the categories of ‘no religion’ and ‘none’, this chapter has highlighted the importance of recognising that the perspectives and dispositions of people who choose these categories are likely to be diverse and that we should not assume that their reasons for doing this are self-evident. This chapter also introduced readers to the concept of ‘non-religion’, to which I return in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine, where participants’ relationships of difference to their constructions of religion are explored further. Participants’ constructions of religion were partly influenced by what was described in this chapter as the ‘philosophical’ turn in RE, an approach to studying religion which is concerned with exploring the philosophical and ethical dimensions of religion and the content of religious beliefs and truth claims. Some of the existing research in the field of youth and religion studies has also emphasised the importance of propositional beliefs, often coupled with the view that the search for an overarching meaning and purpose to life is necessarily important for young people today.

These assumptions are often reflected in the methods that are used to study young people’s perspectives on religion and belief, but my research with 14- and 15-year-olds who report no religion takes a slightly different approach. Rather than

focusing solely on the beliefs of participants, it is concerned with what they say is important in their lives as a whole. Inspired by Day's method for 'researching belief without asking religious questions' (2009a:102), my own research explores how ticking the 'no religion' box relates to the wider lives of participants without asking questions about religion until the end of the interview. Significantly, while Day found that religion and religious beliefs were a relatively unimportant part of the lives of some participants who nonetheless chose 'Christian' as their religious identity, my research with young people of no religion indicates that some who self-identify in this way nonetheless find religion and some religious beliefs to be important at certain times in their lives. As Day discovered, where religion remains important to participants, interview questions about 'belief' or 'life' more generally still enable them to talk freely about religion. Chapter Two explains my methodology in more depth and presents some of its advantages for researching the lives of young people of no religion.

Chapter Two: Research Methodology

Introduction

Despite increasing amounts of academic research on non-religion and secularity (Lee & Bullivant 2010), much empirical research in this field specifically on young people has focused on older teenagers and adults (e.g. Cotter 2011; Catto & Eccles 2013). My own research, focusing specifically on 14- and 15-year-olds who report no religion, therefore seeks to address this lacuna.¹⁶ This chapter details the different stages of the research journey and the various methodological decisions that were made in the design of this study, but it begins by examining the reasons for some of the more fundamental choices of research strategy. A qualitative research strategy was deemed to be most suitable for a study that is focused on the lives of young people, exploring what they consider to be important in life, and whether and how this is related to having no religion. This chapter makes explicit the philosophical considerations that inform this particular strategy and demonstrates how this study is situated within a cluster of approaches to social research, drawing on procedures from some of the different traditions of qualitative inquiry. This is followed by an explanation of the research design that was adopted for this study, defending in particular my combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the photo-elicitation method. My presentation of the research design and description of the stages of fieldwork is structured around the criteria for ‘trustworthiness’ advocated by social scientists Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985). The chapter also

¹⁶ Day’s qualitative research on belief (2009a;2009b;2011) included young people but was mainly focused on those people who chose to identify as ‘Christian’ despite some of these being ‘unbelieving Christians’ (2009b:266-7). There have also been a number of large-scale quantitative studies of younger teenagers’ beliefs and values that have included research specifically on ‘non-religious’ young people (Kay & Francis 1995; Francis & Kay 1995; Robbins & Francis 2010).

examines my role in the research and my relationship to the research sites that were used. In the process, it discusses a number of the ethical considerations involved in studying the lives of young people, and a justification for the types of sampling and analysis that were chosen to gather and interpret the data.

2.1 Philosophical Influences

Qualitative research possesses several features that distinguish it from approaches taken in the natural sciences and quantitative social scientific research, broad characteristics which are informed by particular ways of interpreting the world that have been described as ‘interpretivist’ (Halfpenny 1979). For social scientist Alan Bryman, interpretivism ‘subsumes the views of writers who have been critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world’, with many believing instead that such study ‘requires a different logic of research procedure, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans’ vis-à-vis the rest of the natural world (2004:13). The interpretivist school of thought therefore differs significantly with regards to what is considered to be an appropriate study of the social world from a more positivist approach and the difference is further characterised by considering epistemological and ontological issues regarding whether a correspondence or coherence theory of truth dominates the research, whether the researcher acquires knowledge deductively or inductively, and whether the phenomena under study are independent of or implicated in the role of the researcher (Snape & Spencer 2004:1-23). Qualitative research has therefore been described as ‘a situated activity that locates the observer in the world’ and ‘an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world’ that attempts to ‘interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:3). Qualitative researchers are often concerned with ‘seeing through the eyes of the people being studied’ and providing ‘great

descriptive detail' in their reports of their research. They also often 'view social life in terms of processes' and have a 'preference for a more open-ended' and 'less structured approach' that allows for 'flexibility', which often means that 'concepts and theories' are 'arrived at from the data that are collected' (Bryman 2004:279-284). It is for these reasons that a qualitative research strategy is the most appropriate approach to answering my research questions about young people's lives.

In order to explore both what participants find important and meaningful as well as what they mean by concepts such as 'religion', this study draws on elements from phenomenological and hermeneutic schools of thought as well as more postmodern perspectives such as social constructionism. This research might be described as phenomenological in a 'general non-philosophical sense' in that it seeks an understanding of 'social phenomena from the actors' own perspectives describing the world as experienced by the subjects', and assumes 'that the important reality is what people perceive it to be' (Kvale 1996:52). I would therefore agree with the approach taken to interviewing participants articulated by ethnographer James Spradley, who writes:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?' (Spradley 1979:34; cited in Kvale 1996:125)

While my approach to data collection could therefore be described as phenomenological, my approach to data analysis is influenced by the hermeneutic tradition. Psychologist Steiner Kvale describes hermeneutics as 'doubly relevant to interview research' because it elucidates 'the dialogue producing the interview texts

to be interpreted’ and then clarifies ‘the subsequent process of interpreting the interview texts produced, which may again be conceived as a dialogue or a conversation with the text’ (1996:46).

Educationalist Max van Manen draws on both phenomenology and hermeneutics – traditions which he considers to be complementary – in his (1990) *Researching Lived Experience*, which has also influenced this study. He describes this approach as ‘human science research’ (1990:6). It is concerned with ‘what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced’ (1990:29). It begins with the experiences of the researcher and it is therefore important to ‘be aware of the structures of one’s own experience of a phenomenon’ since this ‘may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon’ (1990:57). This means that, unlike pure phenomenological studies where the researcher ‘sets aside all prejudgements, bracketing (*epoché*) his or her experiences’ (Creswell 1998:52), this approach makes these explicit. As van Manen writes:

...how does one put out of play everything one knows about an experience that one has selected for study? If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already ‘know’, we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories (1990:47).

I was motivated to study the lives of young people of no religion partly by my own experiences of having no religion and of teaching RE to young people who described themselves as ‘not religious’. In this thesis, I attempt to make explicit my understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions and presuppositions, as well as the theories that influenced my research and writing. In this chapter in particular, I hope to make clear how, for example, my understanding of ‘religion’ as being socially

constructed, or my beliefs about some of the problems with non-religious philosophies such as humanism, might have influenced the reflections that follow in the rest of this thesis.

My decision to employ the photo-elicitation technique within in-depth one-to-one interviews with participants stemmed from my hope that the combination of these particular methods would enable the participants to share in as much detail as possible those things that were important to their experiences of life. It was then my aim, following van Manen's approach to researching lived experience, to try to accurately represent what they said to me through writing. According to van Manen, 'human science research requires a commitment to write', but not as 'just a supplementary activity' (1990:126). The process of writing and re-writing is central to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study specific lived experiences: 'To be able to do justice to the fullness and ambiguity of the experience of the lifeworld, writing may turn into a complex process of re-writing (re-thinking, re-reflecting, re-cognizing)' (1990:131). To do justice to the young people's experiences of matters of importance, as well as to their experience of having or at least reporting no religion, I have tried to produce detailed reflections of what they considered to be of significance and value, as well as their varied relationships to what they understood by 'religion'.

However, this study differs from the phenomenological hermeneutic approach to the study of young people's lives as that approach is commonly understood within qualitative social research. In terms of interpretation of the data from this research, the process of thematic analysis that was undertaken in this study was partly influenced by the hermeneutical tradition of interpretation. This iterative process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, as well as writing and re-writing

both introductions to individual participants and the thesis as a whole, was partly influenced by this approach to understanding texts. But, in analysing and reporting the data, I was not seeking to ‘obtain interpretations free of contradictions’ (Kvale 1996:57). Neither was I trying to reach an underlying meaning or essence of the texts, which seems to be one of the aims of hermeneutical interpretation, classically understood. Furthermore, unlike phenomenological research, this study does not ‘search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience’ (Creswell 1998:52). I would also not consider ‘the study of essences’ and the ‘systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures of lived experience’ (van Manen 1990:10) to be an accurate description of the aim and purpose of this research. So, although phenomenology and hermeneutics have had some influence on this study, and van Manen’s combination of these schools of thought has been particularly useful for this research, it could not be described as strictly a phenomenological analysis of young people’s lives or a hermeneutical interpretation of the ‘texts’ produced during our interviews.

As Kvale notes, hermeneutics and phenomenology ‘to some extent provided the background from which postmodern thought developed’ (1996:46), and this study has also been influenced by some of the perspectives drawn from this broad school of thought. In particular, consideration of how concepts have been socially constructed played an important part in my analysis of young people’s understandings of religion and their reasons for reporting none. One of the operating assumptions that I therefore attempted to make more explicit both here and in the preceding chapter is that historical and social contexts influence any construction of the concept ‘religion’. If ‘social phenomena and their meanings are continually being

accomplished by social actors’ (Bryman 2004:16-7), then an important part of understanding how ‘religion’ has been constructed by participants involves consideration of their own descriptions of how the social context and environment in which they live – including school, family, friends and media – influenced these constructions.

2.2 Methodological Influences

In seeking to answer my research questions, I not only draw on a range of philosophical traditions but also employ methods associated with more than one of the ‘five traditions’ of qualitative research inquiry that social scientist John W. Creswell has outlined (1998). He recommends that researchers ‘choose among five possibilities’ of research inquiry ‘including narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, case study and grounded theory’. This study has been influenced by phenomenology, but in terms of its sample size, its more inductive approach to the study of young people’s lives and, to some extent, its approach to the analysis of the data, it shares some of the characteristics of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). As it also seeks to provide a detailed, in-depth analysis of the perspectives of young people that were shared in one-to-one interviews, it also contains elements of case study research that is concerned with the ‘multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context’ (Lewis 2004:52), or ‘multiple case study analysis’, in that, while it was assumed that each of the participants or cases, so to speak, ‘had their stories to tell’, my overall interest was in the ‘collection of these cases or the phenomenon exhibited in those cases’ (Stake 2005:vi). However, although each of these traditions has offered important insights for this study, as with the philosophical influences that shaped it, I have not chosen to rigidly adhere to a single methodological tradition of inquiry. Creswell does not wish to ‘suggest that one

cannot mix traditions' and notes 'overlap' as well as 'distinctions' between them. Furthermore, he does not consider 'purity' to be as important as an awareness of their similarities and differences and an ability to 'sort out the traditions first before combining them' (1998:229). In other words, combinations should be made explicit.

In addition to examining the value of the different traditions of qualitative inquiry for specific research questions, another important part of research design is consideration of what Kvale has described as the 'scientific holy trinity' of social research – the concepts of 'generalizability, reliability and validity' (1996:229). As with many other examples of qualitative research, my intention is not to generalise to the population but to 'explore issues in depth and from the perspectives of different participants, with concepts, meanings and explanations developed inductively from the data' (Ritchie & Lewis 2004:267). My findings are therefore related to existing theory and research on the central themes that were developed from the data, such as self, authenticity, time, narrative, religion and belief, as well as to more general research in the fields of youth and religion, non-religion and religious education, in order to determine the relationship between what is found and previous research in these areas. Rather than continuing to make use of this methodological holy trinity, I have sought to fulfil the criteria for 'trustworthiness' outlined by Guba and Lincoln (Guba 1981:75-91; Lincoln & Guba 1985:289-331). Rather than continue to try to fulfil criteria that are more suited to quantitative studies, Lincoln and Guba suggest that qualitative researchers should aim at fulfilling the following four alternatives: credibility, which is concerned with internal validity and believability of findings; transferability, which relates to external validity or whether findings can be applied to other contexts; dependability, which concerns whether the findings are likely to be applicable at other times; and confirmability, which is concerned with objectivity and

the extent to which the researcher's own values have influenced the research (1985:301-18). In what follows, I demonstrate how elements from the philosophical and methodological traditions discussed above have influenced the design of this project and have informed the various decisions made on the research journey. In particular, I explain how this study aimed to meet Lincoln and Guba's four criteria through a description of the different stages of this research.

2.3 Researching 'No Religion'

As can be seen from the philosophical influences on this research, this is not a study that has been shaped by a single tradition but rather draws on elements from within a range of schools of thought that might loosely be described as interpretivist. In this respect, I agree with the pragmatist approach taken by social scientists Dawn Snape and Liz Spencer, who write:

We are more interested in ensuring a suitable 'fit' between the research methods used and the research questions posed than we are in the degree of philosophical coherence of the epistemological positions typically associated with different research methods. (2004:21).

My research design was motivated by my research questions, both of which changed over the course of my research journey. I initially focused on gaining a greater understanding of pupils' non-religious identities and exploring whether the inclusion of non-religious philosophies within RE might engage these pupils with the study of religion. In this vein, I carried out during the first year of my doctoral studies a small-scale study of the influences on the non-religious identities of young people from a non-denominational secondary school in the West Midlands at which I had previously worked – a school which also became the main research site for this thesis, as detailed shortly. I concluded that participants' reporting of non-religious

identities was primarily influenced by the view that science offers a ‘better explanation’ of life than religion and ‘religion’ was thought of as an inferior science.¹⁷ But the interviews rarely generated knowledge about participants’ own atheism or agnosticism beyond their rejection of the propositional beliefs of religion, the validity of religious truth claims and the science-versus-religion debate. This discovery was useful in shaping the development of the research questions and research methodology for this thesis.

As my research question concerned the relationship between participants’ non-religious identities and their experiences of RE, the majority of interview questions during this initial study were concerned with religion, non-religion and RE. This research focus was also implied by taking participants from RE lessons and locating the interviews in the RE office. Many participants were also aware that I was a former RE teacher at their school. However, after completing the data collection and analysis for this small study, I reflected on whether these factors had prevented an exploration of their lives in general as young people of no religion. As I began to develop the main study, I therefore decided to broaden my research question to an examination of the lives of those who tick ‘no religion’, and consequently made a number of methodological changes to the research process. Perhaps most significantly, I did not include non-theistic stances such as atheism or agnosticism on the questionnaire that participants completed but rather chose the more inclusive category of ‘no religion’. I did not address the topic of religion until the end of each interview unless the participants raised it themselves. Participants were sought from tutor groups rather than RE lessons and were not interviewed in a classroom or office associated with RE. And I was not known to this cohort as an RE

¹⁷ See Wallis 2012 for more details.

teacher. The shift in research question necessitated a shift in research methodology in order to avoid influencing participants through the imposition of a religious or non-religious framework for discussions. This was achieved by re-thinking the role that questions about religion played in the interview process and the context and environment in which the interviews took place. These changes and the research methodology in general were tested during the pilot study.

Lincoln and Guba suggest that research dependability can be achieved by keeping detailed records of the research process, providing what they describe as an ‘audit trail’ (1985:319). This should clearly demonstrate for other researchers and interested readers how the researcher conducted the study, making ‘it possible for an external auditor to examine the processes whereby data were collected and analysed’ (1981:87). The rest of this section of the chapter therefore specifies how I conducted my main study of young people who report ‘no religion’.

Data collection for both the pilot and main studies began with a questionnaire (see Appendix) that gathered a range of seemingly unconnected data but included the religion question from the 2011 Census. The questionnaire was designed to identify participants for the second stage of research without drawing attention to this religion question, which might have had an impact on how pupils then approached and experienced the photography task and interview. As I also wanted to investigate Lee’s inclusion of indifference as part of her definition of the concept of non-religion, I needed to avoid disturbing any of the participants’ indifference by prompting them to think about the question of religion at this stage of the research. I therefore wanted to minimise the likelihood that pupils would try to explicitly relate their responses to the next stages of research either to religion or to their experiences of having no religion, having been alerted to this focus by a questionnaire that

indicated this. The questionnaire was followed by a photography task in which participants were given disposable cameras and asked to ‘take photos of what is most important to you’ or that answered the question, ‘what are the things that are important in your life?’¹⁸ Extra guidance informed them that they ‘might want to take photos of, or photos that represent people, places, objects, activities, and times, as well as beliefs and values’. I stressed that they did not have to cover all of these areas and that they were free to choose to take photographs of whatever was of central importance to their lives within and beyond these broad categories. I needed to allow participants to freely take photographs of what was important in their lives, and to be open to the possibility that neither religion nor non-religion might emerge from this process. Once the photographs were developed, they were returned to participants for annotation and collected back in again, and used for the initial photo-elicitation questions that began the in-depth one-to-one interviews.

In order to discuss different facets of their lives beyond religion or non-religion, participants had been asked to show me through photographs what was important in their lives. They could use the medium to capture their material cultures, including objects, activities, people and places that were important to them. But they could also use photography to represent certain times in their lives, or concepts, beliefs and values. Following the elicitation method, discussed in more detail below,

¹⁸ Although these cameras were likely to be unfamiliar and appear out-of-date for pupils who have grown up with digital cameras and camera phones, it was hoped that their use minimised the chances of pupils behaving irresponsibly with the cameras and uploading inappropriate images online. As they were given to pupils on the last day of term, it was also hoped that this would also reduce the number of opportunities for pupils to behave irresponsibly with cameras in school. Another reason for using disposable cameras, which limited the number of possible photographs, is that it encourages pupils to think more carefully about each photograph taken.

I pursued and developed topics of conversation as they emerged from participants' explanations of what the photographs they had taken meant to them. Following social scientist Linda Liebenberg, the participants' photographs did not serve as data, but rather as 'prompts and supports to participant narrative' (2009:448). Typical starter questions included, 'Can you tell me about this photo?' 'What does this image show?' and 'Why did you take this one?' Follow-up questions about their lives moved on organically from these initial explanations of the participants' photographs, such that the photographs generated discussions that moved beyond the content of the photographs and enabled participants to talk freely about other matters of importance. Although this part of the interview therefore often included discussions about the beliefs and values of the young people, it avoided the tendency to privilege these over other aspects of life precisely because it took participants' own photographs as discussion prompts; not all participants' photographs generated, for example, discussions of beliefs or meaning and purpose in life.

The interviews then moved on to questions about other aspects of their lives, including their values, beliefs and the significance of meaning and purpose in their lives, and concluded with a final set of questions about why they had chosen to tick the 'no religion' box on their questionnaires and what they understood by 'religion'. These semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix) were influenced by some of the questions that Edward Bailey used for his exploration of what he terms 'implicit religion' (1997:60-76) and that Collins-Mayo used to examine what she describes as her participants' 'immanent faith' (Collins 1997:290-2). But as I wanted to avoid drawing attention to the question of religion and non-religion during earlier stages of the research, I was inspired by Day's methods for 'researching belief without asking religious questions' (2009a:102) to leave discussions of religion until

the end of the interview. The majority of the interview was spent discussing participants' lives more generally, with religion and non-religion discussed during the main body of the interview only if and when they arose in the conversation naturally if participants considered them important. Such an approach enabled me to examine not only how having no religion manifested itself in their day-to-day lives, but whether this was something that was largely irrelevant for them and therefore only arose in their responses to the census question or during the explicit discussion of religion in the interview. Part of the analysis therefore included a comparison between reflections on religion that arose unprompted during the interview and responses to direct questions about this topic, left until the end of the interview.

In the concluding section of the interview, a more explicit exploration of participants' understandings of religion and their reasons for choosing to tick the 'no religion' box took place. Pupils were also asked whether or not they identified with a range of statements (see Appendix), each of which was written on strips of paper and laid out in no particular order on the tables beside them. Some of these statements about religion or identity descriptors were specifically non-religious and included statements of indifference as well as anti-religious sentiments. Others were not necessarily in a relationship of difference to religion, covering instead a range of self-identifications and stances that people of no religion might adopt. These statements were similar to the types that might be found in more quantitative studies, but the purpose of including them was to determine whether these statements and stances were important to them and whether and how what pupils then said about them when prompted related to other aspects of their lives.

Before the start of each of the interviews, I explained to participants what would happen, reiterated that their photographs would not be used for any

publications, and gained a second verbal confirmation that they were happy to participate. It was also important to inform them that what they said would be treated as confidential unless they told me anything that might need to be passed on to the child protection officer in the school. They were aware that they would also be given a pseudonym, which was either a name they chose themselves or, if they preferred, one assigned by me.¹⁹ Each of the interviews was digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

One of the principal aims of the pilot, conducted in February 2013, was to identify any potential problems with this methodology, and so at each stage of the process (questionnaire, photography task, and interview) I provided pupils with an opportunity to share any difficulties they experienced during participation. One minor but meaningful alteration involved how I obtained informed consent from participants for the main study. The Assistant Head responsible for pastoral support selected six pupils from different tutor groups in Year 10, rather than from RE lessons. The intention of my first visit to the pilot school was to get informed consent from the pupils, carry out the questionnaire and then explain the photography task, before giving the pupils disposable cameras to use over spring half-term holiday. But as the pupils began to complete the informed consent forms, one of the potential participants decided he no longer wished to take part. It seemed that the formal nature of the consent form deterred him from participating. Therefore, whilst letters seeking permission for participation in the main study were sent to parents/guardians, only verbal consent was sought from the pupils. The five remaining pupils in the pilot study completed the photography task during their holiday and, in order to reflect on the interview process with a larger number of participants, all five were

¹⁹ The names of the participants' families and friends were also changed.

interviewed and asked for feedback on the process. Three of the five participants were girls. All of the pupils identified as 'white' and 'English'. One boy and two girls ticked the 'no religion' box, with the other girl choosing 'Christian' and the other boy adding 'The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon)'. Only the interviews with the three young people who reported 'no religion' (whom I named Abigail, Alice and Craig) were analysed in the same way as those from the main study and used as data for this research.²⁰

Research at the main site was conducted between March and May 2013. From the total of 208 Year 10 pupils invited to participate, I received 54 reply slips; 38 of these were from pupils willing to take part, all of whom went on to complete the questionnaire; 20 of these ticked the 'no religion' box and went on to complete the photography task over their Easter holiday and to attend a one-to-one interview during the following term. The rest of this chapter continues to detail these stages of fieldwork to illustrate this study's dependability, with the research sample, the photo-elicitation method, my role as a researcher and the relationship between data and theory deserving more extended introduction and discussion. But it also addresses how this research meets the criteria of transferability, credibility and confirmability.

²⁰ Although both the pupils who ticked religion boxes spoke about their faith without being prompted by direct questions, I am unable to draw conclusions about whether young people who identify as having a religion are – without being prompted to do so by interviewers – more, less or as likely to talk about the importance of religion in their everyday lives than those young people who have no religion are to discuss the importance of non-religion in theirs. Further, although my study of the lives of young people of no religion both supplements and might be supplemented by research that examines what is important in the lives of 'religious' young people, my work does not require such a comparison in order to be validated as a site of study in its own right.

2.4 Research Sample

Qualitative research is generally based on smaller sample sizes and tends to be focused on producing in-depth studies rather than being concerned with the breadth of research. Guba therefore suggests that it is important to carry out ‘purposive sampling’ that is intended to be neither representative nor generalisable (1981:86). Instead, sampling becomes ‘strategic’: the researcher interviews, for example, ‘people who are relevant to the research questions’ (Bryman 2004:333-4). A short questionnaire was not only useful for selecting a sample of young people to take part in the interviews. It was also necessary to select the sample precisely in this way, through asking respondents to answer the 2011 Census religion question, since this research seeks to contribute knowledge about what is going on when respondents tick the ‘no religion’ box. From the population of 38 young people who completed the questionnaire at the main research site, 20 pupils ticked this box. Within this sample, there were 11 girls, all of whom identified as ethnically ‘white’; six choosing ‘English’ and five choosing ‘British’ for their national identity. Of the nine boys who participated, seven chose to identify as ethnically ‘white’, two ticked ‘mixed’ with one adding ‘Cypriot/English’; six chose an ‘English’ identity with the remaining three identifying as ‘British’.²¹ Including three of the participants from the pilot study, the total sample size of young nones interviewed was 23.

Guba proposes that the purposive identification of such a sample should then be followed by the collection of “thick” descriptive data (Geertz 1973) that will permit comparison of this context to other possible contexts to which transfer might

²¹ Of the pupils who were willing to participate but who did not tick the no religion box, nine were girls, of whom seven identified as Christian (all white, four English and three British) with the remaining two as Jewish (white, British) and Muslim (Asian Indian, English). The nine boys were all white and identified as Christian, seven chose an English national identity and two chose British.

be contemplated' (Guba 1981:86). In other words, descriptions must be convincing enough for readers to be able to judge the transferability of the findings to other settings rather than to establish their generalisability. Psychologist Joseph G. Ponterotto notes that providing details of such things as the 'location of the interviews, the length and recording procedure of the interviews', as well as 'the interviewer's and interviewee's reactions to the interviews' can all assist in this process (2006:546). Detailed thick descriptions of participants' lives, what they considered to be important and their constructions of and relationships to religion follow this chapter in the rest of this thesis. For now, I move to present the social and educational contexts in which the interviews took place, before providing thick descriptions of the interview process that are continued in the section on photo-elicitation.

The research sites for both the pilot and the main study were non-denominational state secondary schools from the same small city in the West Midlands with a largely white middle-class suburban demographic. Neither school was particularly ethnically diverse: 0.6 per cent of the pupils from the pilot school were from minority ethnic groups, with 1.4 per cent whose first language was not or was believed not to be English, whereas at the main research site 9.1 per cent of pupils were from minority ethnic groups with 2.7 per cent of pupils' first language not or believed not to be English. Based on additional data provided by both schools for the period 2012-13, the school used for the pilot study had 635 pupils, which is small compared to the national average at the time of 990, and 46 per cent of these pupils were girls. During this time, 31.6 per cent of the pupils were eligible for free school meals, which is higher than the national average of 26.7 per cent, and 9.3 per cent of the pupils were supported by school action plus or with a statement of Special

Educational Needs (SEN), which again is higher than the national average of 8.1 per cent during this time. Over the same period, the school used as the main research site had 1,409 pupils, 49 per cent of whom were girls; a much smaller percentage of the pupils (7.8 per cent) were eligible for free school meals; and 6.0 per cent of pupils were supported by school action plus or with a statement of SEN.²²

Participants were taken out of a range of lessons, excluding the core subjects of English, Maths and Science, for interviews that were conducted away from spaces that participants might associate with RE or religion. Pupils were invited into the rooms and could choose either of the available chairs. At the end of the interviews, I arranged the statements for participants to consider on desks that were positioned to

²² These data were provided by the schools and were taken from the Department for Education and Ofsted RAISEonline websites (Department for Education 2015a; 2015b). Some participants told stories during our interviews that implied that their families faced a range of financial difficulties (Daniel, Karl, Rachel, and Stacey, for example), but socio-economic data was not gathered for individual participants primarily because findings and conclusions were not going to be generalised to wider populations. Analysis of any relationship between socio-economic background, on the one hand, and constructions of religion, relationships of difference to constructions of religion and reasons for reporting no religion, on the other, was therefore deemed to lie beyond the scope of the current project. Given both the narrower scope and purpose of this small-scale qualitative study, as well as the similarities between the two research sites, there was not enough socio-economic diversity amongst participants to draw conclusions about how the socio-economic backgrounds of individual participants might have impacted upon the themes that emerged from the interviews. However, socio-economic factors could have influenced what participants said about self-improvement in particular (see below, 5.3 Narratives of Self-Improvement and 7.3 Self-Improvement). Recalling that Day found that some participants ticked the 'Christian' box in the 2011 Census because they equated being a Christian with becoming 'successful, respectable, and happy' (2011:188), there may be an important link between responses to the religion question and respondents' aspirations, which future research with young people who ticked 'no religion' might further illuminate.

one side of us, but this also meant that participants could lay out their photographs whilst they talked about them. The position of the desks in the room meant that, while the chairs on which we sat roughly faced each other, participants could avoid eye contact and focus on their pictures if this made them feel more comfortable. I also made sure on pupils' arrivals that the chairs were only approximately across from each other, rather than positioned in an exact arrangement that might have felt more confrontational. Each of the in-depth one-to-one interviews was designed to last for one hour – the length of a normal lesson. I scheduled each of the interviews to take place before morning break or lunchtime so that if we exceeded this time it would cause a minimum of disruption. The average length of the interviews was 70 minutes, and each time the interview overran, I checked whether pupils agreed to continue talking during their free time, letting them know that we could end the interview there if they wanted to. Where we did overrun, all participants were happy to carry on talking, with a handful talking through almost all their lunch break.

2.5 Photo-Elicitation

This study incorporated photo-elicitation into semi-structured interviews. As qualitative interviews seek to understand participants' social world by exploring 'the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds' (Snape & Spencer 2004:3), photographs of such phenomena can assist in this process. Unlike other visual methodologies, photo-elicitation is often less concerned with the analysis and interpretation of the images *per se* and more concerned with the meanings and interpretations of images provided by the research participants taking the photographs (Knowles & Sweetman 2004; Rose 2012). While Bryman notes that 'triangulation' is often used as a term for 'cross-checking findings' in social research, he defines it as the use of 'more than

one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena' (2004:275).²³ But, instead of using photo-elicitation at a different stage of the fieldwork to check that my interpretations of what participants said in the interviews were accurate, discussions about photographs were included within the interviews themselves. For Liebenberg, 'photographs have no meaning in and of themselves: they take up meaning from the contexts in which they are inscribed' (2009:445), and so I would periodically return to participants' photographs to check that I had understood why they considered what was depicted to be important in life. This section of the chapter further justifies my use of the photo-elicitation method, explaining why I believed this would both enrich the interview data that was produced and involve the participants more deeply in the research process.

The photography task provided participants with the time to begin to think about their lives by imaginatively representing what was of central importance to them. While annotating the photographs would remind pupils of their reasons for taking them when it came to the interviews, especially as some of the pupils were interviewed several weeks after they had completed the task, it also provided an additional way for them to contemplate why what they had chosen to photograph was important to them, meaning that they were perhaps more reflective than had I limited this study to solely verbal interviews. As geographer Gillian Rose writes:

Returning the photos to their creator before the interview gives them an opportunity to remove any they do not wish to discuss... it allows the participant to write a caption for each photograph, and in so doing the

²³ For Guba, 'peer debriefing' is a way to strengthen research credibility. Fieldnotes, interview transcripts and drafts of this thesis were shared with my supervisor and findings and arguments were also exposed to 'searching questions' (1981:85) as part of the process of publishing articles and presenting conference papers (see Appendix).

participant begins to reflect on the process of taking photographs in a way that then enriches the subsequent interview (2012:311).

As my interviews began with the participants' self-made images, these prompts were already related to aspects of their lives that they considered to be important, making the following reflections more representative of what they interpret to be or construct as important in their lives beyond the context of the semi-structured interview that followed these more open discussions. This method also required more thought and preparation from the participants, which I hoped would generate richer data than if purely verbal interviews had been used, in which participants might have been expected to discuss significant aspects of their lives without any preparation.

Photo-elicitation offers the possibility of gaining new 'insights into social phenomena, which research methods relying on oral, aural or written data cannot provide' (Bolton *et al.* 2001:503). I felt that it would therefore be a particularly useful method to employ within interviews with young nones. Specifically, I hoped that it would provide a way of accessing 'everyday, taken-for-granted things' (Rose 2012:306) – which might include participants' experiences of having no religion. As Liebenberg, reflecting on her experience of photo-elicitation, notes:

...the process of making images encourages participants to consider why it is that the moment captured on film is important to them. This reflection in turn enables participants to better articulate these experiences during interviews, using images as reminder notes, directing the research focus. The combination of reflection using images means that participant narratives are more representative of how they themselves interpret their context, relationships, decisions and realities (2009:441-2).

Studies have demonstrated how photo-elicitation helps young people discuss aspects of their lives that might otherwise have gone unmentioned in a solely verbal interview. For Croghan *et al.* (2008), one of the most significant contributions photo-elicitation made for their study of young people's constructions of self was that the photographs helped their participants raise difficult issues like race, ethnicity and religion. They note that the 'presence of the visual image provided a platform from which interviewees could expand on aspects of their experience that might otherwise have been inaccessible' (2008:355). By collaborating in this research and capturing images of things that were important to them, therefore, I hoped that pupils would be more able to talk about important aspects of their lives that might be harder to articulate in other types of qualitative interview.

By discussing what each picture showed, and why and when what it depicted was or became important to them, this first question also sought to engage the participants in the research and to provide them with confidence as the interview progressed. For many qualitative researchers, it is important to be aware of, and reflect upon, the significance of power in the relationship between the researcher and researched within the context of an interview, and this is a particularly important consideration when conducting research with children and young people (Christensen & James 2004; Mayall 2004). Researchers have noted that the photo-elicitation method can engender more co-operation and collaboration from young participants because the activity of taking photographs is perceived to be easy and fun (Rose 2012), and feedback from the pilot study suggested that participants had not felt the same way about completing the photography task as they had about completing other tasks set by adults in this environment, such as homework. But this is not the only advantage of interviews that incorporate photo-elicitation over solely

verbal interviews. In particular, beginning interviews with a photo-elicitation question that focused on what was important in the participants' lives allowed them to gain confidence, since they were the authoritative 'experts' on the images they had taken. This method, where 'researcher and participant discuss images created by participants' can also alter the power dynamic within the interview, situating participants, as Liebenberg has suggested, more clearly 'as authorities on their lives' (2009:444). By beginning the interview discussion by focusing on photographs that are produced by participants themselves, participants' awareness of their role in the interview process can be elevated. For research with young people, I felt that this was an important benefit of the photo-elicitation method.

Discussing what was important in their lives before any specific questions were put to them also allowed participants in my research to build confidence to talk about other more difficult and contentious issues raised by more direct questions, such as those about what made them happy or sad. For example, it enabled them to discuss the complexities of relationships within their immediate and wider families and their anxieties about dynamics within friendship groups – including bullying, racism and homophobia – and to talk about more abstract concepts like religion and non-religion. Although one participant, Joanne, told me that she was worried about not being able to talk for the duration of the interview, the photographs she took enabled her to talk confidently and comfortably at length about her family's love of motor racing. And, having been asked to take photographs of things that were important to them, Daniel and Jack – two pupils whose tutor was concerned would not be able to say very much – happily discussed friendship, being valued and rewarded by their families, making connections with other people, and sharing in

activities, through discussing their photographs of Game Boys, takeaway food and Easter eggs.

During the interviews, I also noticed that some of the young people especially benefited from having a material object to focus upon, helping to put them at ease. While Ben laid his photos out on the table and then sat back in his chair to survey them, Karl held his stack of photographs in both hands, tapping their edges on the table and flicking through them, creating a movement that appeared to occupy him and generating a pleasing sound that seemed to reassure him as he talked. For William, too, holding and looking at his photographs as he spoke, rather than having to maintain eye contact with me for long periods of time, provided comfort in the unusual school situation of sustained one-to-one contact. For others, the photographs remained on the table during the rest of the interview, so that they could either provide a concrete example of or specific stimulus for an answer given to a later question or function as a support mechanism for less confident participants, as was especially the case when they would glance at photographs of family and/or friends before responding.²⁴

If more than one account about the social world is always possible, as much qualitative research supposes, then it becomes necessary to ‘demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied’ (Lincoln & Guba 1985:296). For Guba, credibility can be strengthened through triangulation, where ‘a variety of data sources, different investigators, different perspectives (theories) and different methods are pitted

²⁴ Other participants, however, valued the interview as a space in which family and/or friends were not present. For example, Rachel liked being able to talk without her mother knowing what she had said, and both Ellie and Leah were critical of family members but would not have wished to share these criticisms with them.

against one another in order to cross-check data and interpretations'. One of the ways to fulfil this criteria is to make 'member checks', whereby 'interpretations are continuously tested as they are derived with members of the various audiences and groups from which data are solicited' (Guba 1981:84-5). The photo-elicitation stage of the interview was followed by other questions that sought to further probe matters of importance in participants' every-day lives, but I would often return to the photographs to make sure that I had understood what the photographs depicted and why they represented things that were of significance to them. Questions were also sometimes re-framed to aid my own understanding and, to confirm my understanding of what a particular participant said, I would paraphrase their previous answers to ensure clarity of interpretation and to encourage further reflection. This approach to gaining understanding of the participants' lives was guided by Kvale's 'types of interview question' – where initial questions are supplemented with 'follow-up questions', 'probing questions' and 'interpreting questions' (1996:133-5) – and the 'in-depth iterative probing' method outlined by Legard *et al.* (2004:152-153), which seeks to 'obtain greater clarity, detail or depth of understanding' through further questioning of participants' responses to questions (2004:168). Another opportunity for triangulation was provided at the end of the interviews when participants were asked if there was anything else they wanted to add to the recordings and to share how they found the interview experience.

2.6 Researching as an 'Insider'

Confirmability – Lincoln and Guba's final criterion for trustworthiness – relates to the researcher's attempts to be as objective as possible in their approach to the research. This involves 'practising reflexivity' (1981:87), with the researcher making clear their biases and assumptions, admitting their own predispositions and reflecting

on their role as a researcher, as well as seeking to ensure that they have ‘not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of the research and findings deriving from it’ (Bryman 2004:276). I have been attempting to make ‘explicit’ the personal ‘beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions’ that are likely to have impacted the ways in which I approached and analysed the data (van Manen 1990:47). This section of the chapter reflects in particular on how this study of the lives of young nones is likely to have been affected by my beliefs as someone who has no religion and by my previous professional relationship with the school as a former RE teacher. It also considers a number of ethical issues relating to carrying out research with young people.

Although I was baptised and confirmed in the Anglican tradition, at present I would not consider myself to be a practising Christian. I ticked the ‘no religion’ box in the 2011 Census, but I do not think that many of the stances that might be described as ‘non-religious’ or ‘irreligious’ adequately describe my position; I am neither ‘indifferent’ nor ‘hostile’ to religion (Campbell 2013[1971]:24). Further, as I consider the histories as well as the social, political and ethical dimensions of religious traditions to be of more interest and of more relevance to my life than their metaphysical beliefs about God, I do not consider adopting a non-theistic label to describe my identity or relationship to religion particularly helpful. I do not consider my lack of belief in the God of theism, or doubts about religious beliefs in general, to be so fundamental to my life that I find it necessary to adopt ‘atheist’ as a self-descriptor. Prior to starting my doctoral research, I worked as classroom teacher in state secondary schools, where I taught Key Stage Three English and RE at Key

Stages Three, Four and Five.²⁵ As an RE teacher of no religion who has also undertaken postgraduate study of religion, I was intrigued by those pupils who were reluctant to study religion because they were not religious. I would position myself as a researcher of no religion who is curious about the lives of young people who might also choose to identify in this way, interested in what they consider important in life, as well as what their constructions of religion mean for studies of youth and religion, for theories of non-religion and for the provision of RE in schools. But my professional concerns about how a particular type of belief was often considered to be both definitive of 'religion' and central to its study may well have animated my research questions right from the start and, therefore, influenced how I approached data collection and analysis. It is likely, for example, that I was especially aware of responses that seemed to have been shaped by popular common understandings of religion as belief and asked participants to elaborate upon these. I may also have spent more time probing participants' answers to questions concerning the content or nature of belief more generally.

Although my study of young people's lives is not guided by the same motivation as some Christian scholars who have sought to understand why young people might reject religion and what 'implications' this might have 'for mission' (Collins-Mayo *et al.* 2010:xi), my motivation may stem from my own position as someone who reports having no religion. As with all approaches to the study of youth and religion, researchers' roles in the data collection and analysis are never

²⁵ These form part of the stages of state education in England. Key Stage 3 relates to children aged 11-14 years; Key Stage 4 is for 14- to 16-year-olds and is also usually the stage when pupils study for their GCSE examinations; and Key Stage 5 relates to those young people who choose to continue to study after 16, which is usually when A-Levels are studied in the Sixth Form of a school or at a college.

neutral; but, while my focus is not on achieving greater understanding of why people reject 'religion' and what this means for contemporary Christianity, neither is it my intention to examine the lives of my participants in order to underscore the criticisms levelled against religion by New Atheists, for example, or to bolster arguments made by the BHA and others for the continuation of the study of propositional beliefs alongside the inclusion of a peculiarly modern form of atheism in RE. Instead, I consider the lives of young people of no religion to be worth studying in their own right, and believe that seeking to understand what is important to my participants, as well as how they live and what they think about religion, is a valid focus for research.

I approach research on young people of no religion both as someone who also reports no religion and as someone who has experience working with young people. As a former teacher at the school that was used as the main research site for this study, I was especially aware of the possible implications my presence might have on the responses gathered from the pupils (Bell 1999). My role as not only researcher but former teacher could create a power dynamic in the interview that negatively affected those pupils taking part. However, a study in which participants are expected to collaborate by taking photographs raises issues of trust, and I believe that my status as a former teacher and my familiarity with the school reassured pupils, parents/guardians and staff, and therefore ultimately helped rather than hindered the research. As well as the importance of being trusted by the participants, staff and parents/guardians, it was also important, as with most social research, to gain 'voluntary informed consent' from those involved. Following the guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011), I sought written permission from parents/guardians and ensured that pupils for both the pilot and main studies

were given the opportunity to consent to the research after I had explained the aim of the project, the different stages involved, and how the data would be used. Permission slips were then collected in by relevant members of staff and only those pupils who had parental consent were invited to take part in the questionnaire, which determined whether they would continue in the other stages of the research.

Data collection also involved numerous visits to the school over a period of three months, which required a commitment from teaching staff and a willingness to allow pupils to participate in each stage. Staff had to allow me to visit their tutor groups during morning registrations on multiple occasions to explain the project to the whole class, hand out letters and collect permission slips. I had to talk to smaller groups within these tutors groups, gaining verbal consent, explaining different stages of the research and answering questions. I also had to administer the questionnaire to these pupils and explain the photography task to them. Pupils were expected to complete their questionnaires, take photographs during their holiday, return the disposable cameras, and spend time selecting and annotating the images. On a practical level, therefore, I assumed I was more likely to gain access to these schools because of the links I had already established with pupils, staff, parents and guardians. In particular, however, I found that being familiar with the layout of the school made each of these separate stages of the fieldwork more manageable for me as a researcher, especially when I had to accomplish tasks with different tutor groups during the same short registration period. Therefore, overall, I consider the disadvantages of working as an 'insider' to have been outweighed by the advantages.

2.7 Data Analysis

Each of the interview transcripts were analysed thematically. Following the approach outlined by psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, thematic analysis was

understood as ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (2006:6). These themes were ‘organised to show patterns in semantic content’ and then interpreted ‘to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications’ (2006:13). Although in the initial stages of analysis, description and categorisation of themes was the primary concern, throughout each stage, data was continually being interpreted and re-interpreted. This process of interpretation began with transcription; although I sought to represent what the participants said as accurately and as objectively as possible through a verbatim account of each interview in its entirety, this was not a neutral process, and each transcript is likely to have been influenced by my own subjective interpretation of what was said at the time.

After familiarising myself with the data through transcription and the process of writing and re-writing introductions to each participant, I began to ‘generate initial codes’ (Braun & Clarke 2006:18) from the entire data set, focusing on what appeared to be key words and themes that were representative of what participants said, relevant to what the participants considered to be important, and of interest and meaningful in relation to existing work in the fields of youth studies, religious studies and non-religion studies. This included peculiar or repeated words and phrases that participants used to talk about what was important in their lives as well as those used to discuss religion and belief. This stage was followed by a process of grouping particular codes into categories that aided the process of ‘searching for themes’ (2006:19). For example, the phrases participants used such as ‘live life to the fullest’, ‘you only live once’, or ‘I want to be myself and do what I want without religion’ were grouped together under the broader theme of ‘freedom’. This theme also included larger passages of interview data in which, for example, participants

spoke about their desire to leave home and no longer have to follow rules set by parents, the excitement associated with future plans to travel and explore, or their concerns about the limitations on their freedom that following a religion might entail. This stage also involved consideration of ‘the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes’ (2006:20). The theme of freedom was, for example, also related to many other different codes, as well as the themes of ‘authenticity’ and ‘being different or unique’. Themes were then grouped under meta-themes, such as ‘self’ and ‘time’, which subsequently became adapted into chapter headings.

The process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, the notes I had made at the time and the participant introductions I had written all contributed to the next stage of interpreting the data. This involved the process of writing and re-writing my interpretations in order to refine them (van Manen 1990:131). During this process, the themes that I developed from the interview transcripts informed the decisions I made about suitable theorists to consult in order to elucidate the data and to support and develop my interpretations and arguments. As well as being influenced by my beliefs, biases and assumptions as an RE teacher and researcher of no religion, this stage was therefore also influenced by the particular ‘theories’ that I used to make sense of the data – another level of influence on one’s research which should be made explicit (1990:47). My identification of the themes that emerged from my analysis of the data lead me to a number of different theorists who have explored the concepts of self, authenticity, freedom, time and narrative, and two important theoretical influences on my interpretation of this data came from Taylor and Ricoeur.

I read Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992) as a postgraduate student in the Religious Studies department at Lancaster University, where Paul Heelas and Woodhead both worked as sociologists of religion. Heelas and Woodhead used Taylor's analyses of the subjective turn in the modern world and of the concept of authenticity to make sense of data gathered in the Kendal Project, an important study of contemporary religiosity published in 2005 as *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. I then read Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) as part of my study of non-religion and secularity, but have made particular use of his account of the self as a person's self-interpretation of what is important to them. While I was already aware that Ricoeur had written a multi-volume work entitled *Time and Narrative*, it was through my reading of both Taylor and van Manen that I was prompted to explore in more detail his theories on the relationships between time, narrative and identity (1984;1990;1991a;1991b). His model of mimesis is helpful for seeing how the participants made sense of their present lives by constructing narratives out of their past experiences and anticipated futures.

However, it might be worth raising a question here: Is it problematic that the theories that I found most helpful in illuminating the themes that arose from interviews with young nones stem from the work of two Christian philosophers? To what extent are their philosophies informed by their religious faiths? And, therefore, to what degree is the validity of the philosophical concepts that I am deploying to make sense of what these young people of no religion said dependent upon these theorists' religion and, therefore, problematic?

Philosopher Galen Strawson (2004) is particularly critical of what he considers to be the influence of Christianity on Taylor's and Ricoeur's theories of

identity. For Strawson, the argument that ‘we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form’ and ‘see our lives in a story’ (Taylor 1989:47,52), or that it is necessary to give ‘an ethical character’ to one’s life and that this can only occur if one’s life is ‘gathered together...in the form of a narrative’ (Ricoeur 1990:158), is religiously motivated. These theories driven by these theorists’ ‘sense of their own importance’, which Strawson suggests is not surprising since, he says, ‘religious belief’ is ‘really all about the self’ and ‘one of the fundamental vehicles of human narcissism’ (2004:436-7). But other scholars who engage with the work of figures like Taylor and Ricoeur separate their faith from their philosophy. Theologian Michael W. DeLashmutt, for example, notes that Ricoeur himself often performed this bracketing of faith. While ‘Christian theological themes play into his work’ (2009:612n3), he writes that Ricoeur is not a ‘crypto-theologian’ whose philosophy ‘can only be truly understood through a re-reading in the light of faith’ (2009:590). It is therefore possible to find value in the philosophical work of both Ricoeur and Taylor without sharing their religious faith.

While their theories of the role of narrative in shaping our self-interpretations and sense of identity, for example, may well have been motivated by Christian beliefs, and while the pertinence of such theories for non-European and non-Christian perspectives on life can be questioned (Gallois 2007:44; Klepper 2013:15), the historical influence of Christianity on western culture means that they might still help us make sense of the self-interpretations of young people in the West today. In particular, I have found them helpful in my interpretation of themes like self, authenticity and narrative, arising from interviews with young people who do not share their religion. Chapters Four to Eight discusses the relationships between these themes, also relating them to the participants’ constructions of ‘religion’, their self-

interpretations and their experiences of having no religion. In each of these chapters, I move from data to the theoretical literature that informs and supports my interpretations of the data.

Conclusion

This interview-based study of the lives of young people of no religion adopts a pragmatic approach to both the methodological and philosophical frameworks that inform qualitative research. It might be described as interpretivist in its emphasis on seeking greater understanding of what is of importance and value for these young people's lives, yet it is not guided by one single philosophical tradition such as phenomenology, hermeneutics or social constructionism. Each of the interviews was conceived of as a 'text' constructed through the interview process as well as the processes of transcription and thematic analysis. These texts were then read (and re-read) in dialogue with theorists who helped me to make sense of them. My interpretations were written (and re-written) as only one of the possible ways in which these texts might be written; it is assumed that there are likely to be other ways of interpreting the data.

The meta-themes of self and narrative, which emerged from this process, are explored in more detail in Chapters Four and Five. The next chapter introduces the participants, providing illustrative quotations from their interviews and brief descriptions of their photographs and what they thought was important in life. It is hoped that this serves to familiarise the reader with each of these young people before they are encountered again in the findings and analysis contained within Chapters Four to Nine.

Chapter Three: The Participants

Introduction

Rather than focus solely on participants' understandings of religion and their reasons for having none, this thesis takes a more holistic approach to exploring the lives of young people of no religion. Each of the following chapters explores what participants considered to be important, discussing data in the context of a particular theme, examining it alongside findings from empirical studies of other young people and considering it in relation to theoretical literature used to support my analysis. In this chapter, however, space is provided to introduce the young people separately, presenting what is important for each of them as individuals. Each of these outlines includes an overview of what they said about the photographs they had taken, annotated and chosen to share with me in their interviews, and highlights a quotation from their transcripts that I felt encapsulated them as unique young people. Although there is only enough space here to provide 'snapshots' of what is important to them, these descriptions illustrate the distinctiveness of each participant and more clearly demonstrate the diversity within this group of young people.

3.1 Abigail

I've got my own story to tell about my life and I'm sure everyone else does ... I know what I'm doing and I wonder if it's similar to everyone else, the way people think.

Abigail was one of a few participants who self-consciously understood her life as a story. This story was one of journeying or questing, and involved finding lasting happiness – which she considered to be the most important thing in her life. Although her parents, and especially her brothers and best friend, helped shape her narrative, time also played a central role in her story, which Abigail represented by

photographing a clock. Her desire to grow up and be further on in life's 'journey' was expressed on a number of occasions. She seemed dissatisfied with her circumstances and often wished for time to pass so that she could leave home and become more independent, finding a job that would help others, and eventually looking after a family of her own. The photograph of the word 'community', which she had taken when visiting a community centre whilst on holiday, represented the importance of caring for others and helping people around her. However, she also wished 'that the clock could go back', so that she might return to a period in her life before her parents' divorce.

3.2 Alice

I think it's important to have something to strive towards because otherwise there's not much point ... improving yourself, I think that's important because you only get one shot at life, at least, that's what I believe.

Self-improvement was central to Alice's thoughts about what was important in life. She had taken a photograph of money because she felt that this was a necessity in life, but she was also determined to enjoy a successful career in the future. During her holiday she had visited Cambridge with her family and taken pictures of King's College, where she hoped to read Law, as well as the photographs that represented her hobbies of horse riding, karate and cycling, were all chosen to signify the importance of working hard and achieving her goals. Her aim to improve and better herself had also been shaped by what she understood as her position and her relationship to others within a larger universe. She had taken photographs of meat substitute products to represent the important recent decision to become a vegetarian, saying that human beings should not 'feel we have the right to decide we're in

charge'. Feelings of gratitude towards her ancestors and 'all the animals that came before us' gave her existence more meaning than had her childhood belief in an afterlife.

3.3 Ben

I worked it out recently: I've spent over a hundred nights camping with the Scouting movement. ... Um, which is quite scary, cos it's two per cent of my whole life I've spent with Scouts which puts into perspective how much Scouts affects my life.

Ben had taken all of his photographs at a Scout camp he attended during the school holiday. Although his family, friends and teachers were important to his life, the experience of Scouting, represented by pictures of camp fires, outdoor activities and a statue of Baden-Powell, had more of an influence on what he chose to talk about in the interview. For example, he had taken a photograph of a climbing wall, not simply because it was a fun and exciting activity, but because it also represented 'trying to reach for your goals'. Being careful and cautious, and also thinking strategically about his next move, had influenced how he approached life. But, although he was now old enough to attend Explorers, he preferred to spend time with his former, more familiar troop, hoping to 'become an adult leader' by gaining experience from working with his old friends, instead of following the normal path of progression through the Explorers. He wanted to help these younger boys 'get as much out of being a Scout as possible, cos it's only four years and it goes so quickly'. He was also aware of how brief his time at school was, and reflecting on the passage of time had made him more determined to succeed at school. But his determination to achieve and succeed also seemed to put him under additional pressure. He worried that he was 'not organised' and might do something that was not 'quite right', which

would mean he would need to seek reassurance from his teachers. However, being aware of his failings, and recognising when he required help with his work, formed part of his overall ‘strategy’ to succeed. Overcoming such difficulties was one of life’s challenges, and addressing personal weaknesses was something Ben believed his experience at Scouts had taught him to embrace rather than shy away from.

3.4 Beth

I don’t really like growing up, I love being a kid. I have loads of free time, I miss all the free time I had when I was little and all the random stuff I could do, and everyone would just, like, think it was normal cos I was a kid.

Beth had taken a photograph to represent the family ‘tradition’ of sharing meals together, which she valued because this was a time when they ‘talk about things’ and ‘everyone gets to say things’. The freedom to say what she liked at these family gatherings as well as being free to ‘muck about’ with her brothers was also important. The significance of being free also emerged during our discussion of the photograph she had taken to represent drawing, which was a hobby that she found particularly liberating, because it ‘feels like I can draw anything’. Drawing was also something she could do when she was ‘stressed’ about her revision, and was also important because she often felt the need to ‘do something productive’ and preferred to be busy rather than ‘just sit around’. She also loved fantasy fiction, which made her see how people believe things for many different reasons, and not always because something is ‘true’. She enjoyed believing in ‘ghosts, monsters and all that’, partly because such beliefs provided her with the freedom to escape reality whenever she liked. But holding these beliefs also helped her to avoid thinking about growing up and taking on adult responsibilities. The freedom to escape to a world

where there was no pressure to conform to other people's expectations or to use her time productively helped make her life 'more interesting' and 'more fun'.

3.5 Craig

Family, friends and football

Instead of taking photographs of his own family, Craig took a picture of the word 'family' in order to portray it as something that he thought was valuable for everyone. The importance of 'respect' and not taking family members for granted also emerged in what he said about his father, who had recently 'walked away on me' and left the family home. Rather than give the impression he was upset by this, Craig described what had happened as 'good' because 'if he doesn't want to know me and he doesn't want to see me, then it doesn't really bother me'. He felt that this experience had only served to strengthen his relationships with his sister and, especially, with his mother, who was a 'mum and dad in one' and 'always there for me.' The love and loyalty he felt towards his mother and sister also influenced his belief in gender equality. The value Craig placed on fairness, justice and equality also became apparent in what he told me about football, which he saw as a great leveller: 'it doesn't matter if you're rich or you're poor, it's something that you can all do together'. He also photographed pictures from his bedroom wall that depicted Aston Villa's former captain, Stiliyan Petrov, who had been diagnosed with Leukaemia in 2012 and talked about how the work he and other fans had done to raise money for the Leukaemia Trust both supported their captain and demonstrated how football could unite people in a common cause.

3.6 Daniel

I think the meaning of life is to make sure that you enjoy the life you're given because it doesn't last forever.

Life at home was difficult for Daniel because his mother was 'recovering from a brain tumour'. Enjoying time with her, as well as his brother, aunt and grandmother played an important part in his life and influenced what he decided to talk about in his interview. He had taken photographs of chocolate Easter eggs and takeaway food because they represented how much his family cared for him and how 'they want my life to be as good as it can get'. Since his mother's illness, they had to rely on his aunt who 'earns most of the money for the family', and who provided the 'treats' that he chose to photograph. He knew that such things were not 'always great to have' because they were unhealthy, and so they were luxuries that they could have 'every now and then'. These particular treats had been rewards for school work, which added to the sense of occasion and made them particularly special for him. They also illustrated the importance of sharing: he would happily share his chocolate eggs with his elder brother, and sitting together to eat something as a family, rather than eating alone or in front of the television, also made these occasions special. He had learnt to cherish the significant moments that he shared with his family, aware that they would not last forever, and thought it was important to 'have fun in the moments you have with them'.

3.7 David

...some people are afraid of heights, some people are afraid of the dark, some people are afraid of needles ...And sometimes you've got to accept that, and if someone does make fun of you for it, just ignore them...

David was one of a number of participants who practised a martial art, but whereas for each of the others, this was considered to be a fun or useful activity, he seemed to be genuinely afraid that he might be attacked by someone in the street. He wanted 'a peaceful life' in which he would not have to worry about being 'mugged' in the street or be 'scared of the dark' when he was in the house by himself. Although his fear of the dark appeared to be a concern for him, it was also something he seemed quite happy to discuss with me during the interview. The sounds he heard from 'old pipes' in his house would often make him imagine someone else was present, and so he would 'turn the TV on to make those sounds go away'. As well as seeking comfort from familiar sounds, he would also try to avoid being 'home alone' and preferred it when he was surrounded by loved ones. David's father, mother and sister played a significant part in his life, and to illustrate their importance he had taken separate photographs of each of them standing at the front of his house holding his cat Jasper. Taken together, people, place and pet represented the importance of safety and stability in his life. The help he received from his parents throughout his childhood meant that he wanted to 'return the favour of helping them', which, as a responsible teenager, was something he now felt more able to do. David had taken photographs to represent the enjoyment of being on holiday at Center Parcs with his family and their friends, during which he would look after some of the younger children, and so the photograph also illustrated how he was now being trusted more by the adults in his life. At home, he was also happy to be known as 'a techno

teenager', a name his parents had given him because he helped his mother with her computer. Assisting others and being given more responsibilities appeared to make him feel better about his own fears and weaknesses.

3.8 Ellie

I know it sounds boring, but I just want to be ordinary and normal. And, like, have children when I'm older. And, like, have a job and just be normal, not really anything else.

What emerged from Ellie's interview appeared to be shaped by her experience of an unpleasant family crisis, which had resulted in her brother leaving the area and taking her niece and nephew with him. She particularly missed her niece and nephew, partly because they reminded her of 'being little' and it was 'nice to have company like that', but also because they were blissfully unaware of what had happened to the family. She wished that she did not 'know everything' because it upset her that family members 'could be so hurtful'. Her desire for an 'ordinary and normal' life was a recurring theme within our conversation. She began by indicating a need for security, stability and continuity, illustrated through her photographs of the family home and her grandfather's car, which the family had inherited after both he and Ellie's grandmother died. It had been 'really hard to cope without them', so the car was symbolic of his life and reminded her of the times she 'used to be in it with him'. When she spoke of her future life, she reflected on the fact that in the past she had 'always wanted to be a doctor' so that she could help other people. But, as she was in the 'bottom set in Science', this was something she thought was 'never going to happen.' Rather than continue to pursue this ambition, she had decided to dismiss it in order to pre-empt future disappointment. This was safer than trying to achieve something and fail. Without ambition, she thought she would not experience

anything ‘out of the blue’ but could continue to lead ‘a normal life, without any complications’ instead. However, reading John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, a love story about two young people suffering from terminal cancer, had given her a slightly more optimistic perspective on the future. The novel had made her realise how ‘precious life is’ and, although recently at the weekend she had sometimes felt that she could not be ‘bothered to get up and have a shower’, since reading the book, she would go out with her friends more often on days off because, she thought, ‘you do have to live your life’ and ‘there’s no point in not living it’.

3.9 Henry

I’d like to just experience things – that’s how I’d like to live my life by experiencing stuff. If I like, I like it. If I don’t like it, I don’t like it.

Henry had taken a number of photographs that represented his love of racquet sports, skiing, ‘gaming’ and listening to music. But when he discussed them, he focused on the enjoyment he derived from sharing these activities with other people. This was because it was important to be able to ‘communicate’ and ‘interact’ with his friends and family, and it was also reassuring to be ‘part of a community of people who share the same... interests’. During the interview, he often reflected on past experiences, events which he appeared to decide to talk about because they helped him illustrate the significance of being free to choose how he lived his life. But this freedom was something that he also considered to be a responsibility; there were, he thought, always consequences for the choices we make. Having ‘experienced stuff’ was another central motif in Henry’s interview. Life was made up of a series of experiences and it was important to embrace these, even when they were difficult or challenging rather than fun or ‘funny’; it was always possible to learn something from them and develop as a person. For example, although his experiences of being

bullied had been 'sad', he believed they had also made him stronger. As well as recounting the past in this way, he also imagined his future as an adventure, and his 'big aspiration' was to 'go on a massive road trip around Europe'. Being free to experience life in this way seemed important because it would provide him with the opportunity to 'tell a story' of another exciting chapter in his life.

3.10 Jack

I've had it before where someone's said, 'oh, I'll be your friend', sort of thing, and two days later they've been, like, 'oh, no, I don't want anything to do with you', sort of thing. So I don't want to be that person.

Jack had taken photographs of his mother, father and sister, and new best friends, Joe and Lizzie, to represent the importance of spending time with and being loyal to family and friends. He had led quite a solitary childhood and, rather than playing with other children, would spend most of his free time playing video games on his Game Boy. Although he had taken a photograph to represent his hobby of refurbishing and re-selling old Game Boys, he had also become more sociable recently. During 'the summer of last year' he had made friends with Joe and Lizzie, two teenagers who were both a couple of years older than him. This age difference did not seem to matter, and spending time with his new friends was when he now felt happiest. He had been let down by people in the past, but he had now found friends that he could rely on for support and reassurance. He was also able to offer them help when they needed it, and this reciprocity was an important part of his relationship with both friends and family. Although he thought that his parents were 'quite important' because 'they help me grow up and buy things and let me use their house', his relationship with his sister was slightly different. She was away from home and Jack looked after her dog to 'help her out', which appeared to be an

important part of how he perceived their relationship. Being able to help other people was now an essential part of the relationships he formed. 'If I'm friends with someone', he said, 'I want to help them out.' His life was now much more sociable and in many ways more enjoyable than when he was younger. He still played video games, but was now more interested in sharing photographs online and posting videos on his YouTube channel, from which he had also 'gained friends'.

3.11 Joanne

...if I see [a ghost] then I'd believe it, but I haven't so I don't know.

Joanne thought it was important to do 'what you enjoy' in life and only do 'things you want to do'. Rather than trying to conform to other people's expectations, she preferred to be honest about what she enjoyed and did not seem to worry about what other people thought. This was part of the reason she thought it was important to be 'yourself' around other people, and not behave differently in different situations. She thought that telling the truth about herself would prevent people from getting hurt, but her enjoyment of the hobbies she had chosen to represent in the photography task was partly dependent on the stability and security she felt from being part of a loving and supportive family, and she said she was most able to be herself at home, where she felt 'safe'. Telling the truth would also help her to establish certainty in life. This was why she was unsure about fortune telling, which could be 'twisting your head or something, like lying and then making you think stuff', and uncertain about the stories people told about ghosts. Her concern with 'the truth' and whether something was 'real or not' could only be resolved through personal experience; if she had not had such an experience, she did not know what to think about the veracity of others' claims. She enjoyed following the 'real life' stories of characters in soap operas, but when stories appeared not to reflect experiences she was familiar with, such as those

relating to ghosts or the supernatural, she either felt confused about their truthfulness or became indifferent.

3.12 Karl

I still have my life ahead of me and so when people are saying, just enjoy it while you can, that's kind of what I've been doing ... Cos, like, it's constantly in my head, you know, "you only live once"...

An important part of Karl's narrative was trying to follow the motto 'you only live once'.²⁶ He often stated that he applied this maxim to his life, and therefore did not care too much about the consequences of his actions. And yet just 'going with the flow' was not always easy and he often seemed concerned about what other people were 'saying' on social networking sites, what his family and especially his father said and did, and what his peers thought of him. Although he was now enjoying life, it had not always been so easy, and he and his mother had 'been through quite a few hard times together'. One particularly difficult period in his life had been when he was bullied at another school, which had started shortly after his parents' separation and had continued to affect his self-esteem. Some of the photographs had taken were 'selfies' similar to those he shared on Twitter. In order to gain the respect of his peers, in these pictures he wore t-shirts with the names of his favourite bands emblazoned upon them. These reflected his desire to be both distinctive and the same as his friends and other people on social media. Karl was unsure what the most important thing in life was, but thought it was 'probably my family', which was 'everyone's most important thing in life'. And although he told me that he had not thought much about his future life, he wanted to do 'something that would make you

²⁶ 'You only live once' ('YOLO') is an expression widely used on Twitter and other social media. It was popularised by the Canadian rapper Drake in his 2011 song 'The Motto'.

rich', which was also 'everyone's ambition'. Here, and at other points in the interview, he seemed to appear nonchalant about what he valued or what his future plans were, but also wanted to demonstrate that what he cared about or aimed to do with his life was normal and no different from his peers.

3.13 Katie

... just being able to connect with them [her family] and stay in tune with them, and being able to talk to them so that they'll be able to know that I'm close to them...

Forming emotional connections with other people was central to what Katie told me. She chose to discuss photographs that represented her hobbies of drawing and singing, which helped her to express how she felt because she sometimes found it hard to 'tell anyone anything'. Until the recent birth of her siblings, she had been an only child, and so in the past drawing had been a hobby that she could do when she was alone and 'had nothing to do'. This was also a 'comforting thing' that helped her to 'relax' when she felt 'angry'. Singing was 'another way to get [her] emotions out', and her experience of performing in a recent talent show at school had strengthened her belief that she was 'meant to be a singer'. Singing was something that she felt was 'true to me' and it did not matter if other people did not like this as 'it's just me'. Although being different from other people was important, there was also a sense that this had often made her feel quite isolated and in need of the support of her family. She recognised how important it was that her mother had 'always been there' for her, 'even when my dad left'. She also told me that, when her mother and step-father get married, she will 'feel more connected' as they would then become a 'family'. The importance of making and maintaining connections was also reflected in her decision to photograph her laptop, which she had chosen to represent keeping

in touch with family members. Her laptop was also significant because it contained ‘lots of family photos’ so she was able to ‘keep the memories’ of her family safe and she worried about the possibility that in the future she might lose the close connections and ties she had made with them.

3.14 Laura

I’d like to be a person that helps others, so I’d like to leave the world knowing I’d helped people in some way. I think that’s something I’d really like to do, sort of know that something I’d done had impacted others in a good way.

The love and support that she received from her family was important to Laura, and the majority of her photographs were of family members. The guidance and support they gave her were fundamental to her sense of happiness, plans for future success and her desire to help others. Her love for her family also meant that her most troubling concern in life was that something bad might happen to them – something that ‘really worries’ her. When she felt anxious about this or had any other ‘irrational’ fears, talking to her family would ‘sort of make me see sense a bit’ and help her to feel ‘calm’. Her parents were also ‘really keen on respecting the environment’ and as a family they would ‘recycle everything’ and try to buy ‘food that hasn’t come too far’. This meant that Laura would sometimes ‘worry about the environment’, about ‘ice caps melting’ and what to do about ‘greenhouse gases’. As she had also ‘grown up watching the news’ and had ‘always been quite interested in current affairs’, she was aware of the ‘terrible things’ that many people in the world experienced on a daily basis. This realisation made her feel ‘glad’ that her life was ‘alright’ and that she had ‘a nice family’. But it also motivated her to help. She was inspired by people involved in volunteer work, which had encouraged her not only

‘to be more kind to others’ and ‘a more helpful person’, but also to make ‘the world a better place’ by working for a year as a volunteer in ‘Africa or India’, which she planned to do when she was older.

3.15 Leah

**I just think that [pause] you’re given a life, you’ve just got to use it
and you’ve just got to thank the fact that you have a life and you’ve just
got to use that life and be happy with the life you’ve got.**

The future played an important part in what Leah told me. This was not because she was focused on particular ambitions or career goals, but rather because the future represented for her the continuation of life, and it was this that seemed to give her present life meaning and purpose. When she was much younger, she had been very ill with anaemia, and this was an experience that she thought helped her value life more than other people. Her photographs of her family and pet rabbit were chosen because they represented security and stability. When she felt sad or alone, Leah found comfort in surrounding herself with everyday material objects like her clothes or house keys, not because of the value of the objects themselves but because of their association with her family and her home. The closeness she felt to her immediate family had also influenced her thoughts about her own future. As well as being scared of death, she was concerned about the uncertainty of what lay ahead for her. Tackling this uncertainty and fear might, she thought, be easier if she could have the comfort and constancy that she felt would come from having her own family. Although she was unable to see what purpose her life might have in the present, there was hope that, despite the uncertainty of the future, one day she would have her own family and this would help her to achieve fulfilment in life.

3.16 Martha

I suppose not changing who you are according to bullies, if you know what I mean. Because, like, I definitely think it's ... wrong to kind of change who you are, you know, just because someone doesn't like it...

Martha had taken photographs to represent how much she loved spending time at home with her family. She would also always try to avoid upsetting them because she had a fear of 'heightened emotions' and disliked 'arguments and shouting'. This meant that whenever she suspected her parents or sisters were upset by something, she would try to cheer them up or make them laugh when they were feeling sad. Her fear of upsetting her parents or sisters would also mean that sometimes, after a bad day at school for example, she would need to spend time alone in a tree in their garden to avoid snapping at them. She had also photographed trees because they were her 'escape-y friends,' and climbing them to be alone was one of a number of forms of escapism that preoccupied much of her time. Her desire to escape reality and 'live in the world of stuff that doesn't exist' was part of the reason she enjoyed watching Anime films. She illustrated her love of Japan and Japanese culture in general through photographs that represented both sushi and the martial art aikido. She also enjoyed going to the seaside and looking at the sticks of rock in the sweet shops, and during her holiday she had taken a photograph of these to represent her love of 'colourful stuff and happy stuff'. Martha also told me that she spent a lot of time 'day-dreaming' and described enjoying activities such as blowing bubbles in the garden that helped her to escape from the unpleasant aspects of reality.

Her desire to be free to 'imagine stuff' and not to be 'limited by anything' also affected how she behaved with her peers at school. She thought it was necessary to stand up for herself and fight for what she thought was important in life and not be

swayed by what other young people said to her. This meant that it was wrong to change who you are simply to fit in with other people, and so she chose to wear the clothes that she liked even when her peers called her a ‘weirdo’. She also tried to stand up for other people and if she saw ‘someone else doing something wrong’ at school she would get involved, even when ‘it’s not my place to intervene’, which meant that sometimes she got into trouble and made herself unpopular. Her desire to protect others was also part of the reason she wanted to eventually become a vet, which had also been influenced by her experiences of nursing her pet dog Amber back to health after a serious illness and of carrying out ‘volunteer-y work-y stuff’ at a local donkey sanctuary.

3.17 Megan

[Family and friends are] just company. I don’t like to be alone ... It’s nice to be around different people all the time...

The experience of being bullied at school seemed to have impacted how Megan approached life. Fortunately, she now had a group of loyal, supportive friends who were ‘always there’ for her, but there had been a time when she felt quite alone and unable to cope with her situation. Most of the photographs she had taken were close-up images of her family and friends, all of which represented for her the importance of being close to the people she loved. Her experience of being bullied had taught her more about herself and what she required at times of stress and difficulty. She valued sharing problems rather than keeping them to herself, because ‘it just builds up’ and ‘in the end you just explode’. Being able to share her problems with loving and supportive family members was very important even with some of her youngest relatives. One of the photographs that she had taken was of her young cousin Suzie, who had also been bullied at school. As she was only four years old, she was too

young to give advice, but by simply listening to Megan's problems she had been a great help. The importance of feeling safe and secure, as well as being surrounded by people she loved, influenced her choice of future career, as well as her views on life and death. Her desire to have company and work with families meant that she wanted to train to become a midwife when she left school. Although this particular career might be 'stressful' at times, she thought that it would also bring her 'happiness', particularly because she would see how the babies 'bond with different families'. Eventually, she hoped to have her own family, which would help her to 'sympathise' with the mothers she would meet, but would also provide her with more company because 'you always need people around you'.

3.18 Michael

I'm also quite scared of the future. I don't know why, it's just that sort of feeling of failure, you know? I'm very scared of that, which I guess is why I always try to do my best and work really hard...

Fears about the future and concerns about working hard were key elements of what Michael told me in the interview. Many of his photographs related to school work, as this was 'probably the most important thing for me' and also how he believed he would be able 'to get a good job'. Working hard was something that was encouraged at home and there was an assumption in his family that hard work was an essential part of life. The importance of his imagined future career also meant that, although he had 'always enjoyed' learning new things at school, this was never for the sake of learning and acquiring knowledge, but rather because he believed that it would improve his 'chances in life'. Part of the reason that he took his school work so seriously was because he was afraid of failure and what this might mean for the way he lived his life. He had been influenced by television programmes that depicted life

in prisons, which he associated with the failure to ‘work hard’ and ‘get a good job’. Programmes about unemployment also scared him into working hard at school, so that he might one day have a successful career. He was afraid of ‘living on benefits’ because he imagined this experience would affect his attitude to the rest of society, which in turn influenced his plans to become a doctor – a career that would help him feel that he had ‘given back to society’ and performed his ‘duty’. While he was also interested in ‘all the science-y subjects’, he thought it was important to help those who were ‘less fortunate’ and felt that treating the sick and ‘making people better each day’ would give him the opportunity to help those who were ‘not as well-off as me’. For Michael, there was no alternative to working hard at school in order to ‘put back into society’; this was the only way that ‘you’ll have a good life’.

3.19 Nick

[What is important is] Probably spending time with people, really. Whether it’s family or friends, or just, yeah, enjoying life with other people and having fun, to be honest.

Nick was a very sociable and confident pupil whose life was focused on spending time with family and friends. What he understood as his parents’ unconditional love for him had affected the way he treated other people. He wanted ‘to be the best person I can’ because of the example of his parents, who were ‘nice people who treat other people with respect’. His friends, whom he referred to as ‘a surrogate family’, were also very supportive because ‘everyone just helps each other with whatever problems they’ve got’. As well as photographs of his family and friends, he had also taken photographs to represent the enjoyment he felt playing the drums in his band and playing football with his friends. Through both of these activities, he experienced a sense of ‘team spirit’ and felt ‘part of a community’. He had also

photographed his wardrobe to represent clothes and fashion. Buying new clothes was important because they would make him feel more 'confident' and it was essential to be 'presentable', especially if he was 'trying to impress someone'. Caring about what other people thought of him and how he was treated by others was also something that had affected how he chose to behave. He thought that it was important to be 'selfless' rather than be 'selfish', and his ambition was to work in medicine or law.

3.20 Rachel

To me the most important thing in life is family at the moment. Especially my dad cos there's a lot of things that's gone on with my mum and she's not here anymore ... she's not allowed to see me ... so it's really just my dad that's just closest to me.

At the time of her interview, much of Rachel's experience of being a young person was influenced by the difficulties she was experiencing with her mother. This was part of the reason that most of photographs were of items she associated with her father, her grandparents, or the past. Her photographs of her pets prompted stories about her grandfather, who had given them to her before he died, and so they helped to maintain links to the family past. She also photographed an ornament of 'a little woman', which was important because it was something her grandmother had 'ever since she was little cos it kept being passed on generation and generation'. A picture of her grandparents' wedding day was also a treasured possession, because 'it's nice to see and look back and picture them a lot more', and 'really just sort of think about them'. Her father's 'dream catcher' was only really important because of its association with him. As well as reflecting on the past and thinking about the close relationships with relatives that she trusted and loved, Rachel also found that expressing her emotions through music and drama helped her to cope with the

present. She enjoyed listening to music because it was ‘empowering’ and could provide a ‘release of my anger’ and in Drama lessons she sometimes read scripts that she related to her own life, which helped her to ‘imagine things that you can do differently’. Sometimes she gave the impression that what she had experienced at home was partly her fault and so she often talked about the necessity of self-improvement. Rather than dwell on how her circumstances in the past might have been better, she thought it was important to reflect on what ‘you actually could have done’ in order to help her to ‘improve’ now and in the future and ‘just go on with life’. Making detailed plans for the future was another way in which she learnt to cope with her difficult circumstances. She had already decided that she wanted to ‘be a performer or an author’ and had made detailed plans and backup plans of how she would achieve this.

3.21 Stacey

So all of those [photographs and pictures], like, represent my past life ...

**I kind of just really love having pictures cos it represents where I’ve been
and what I’ve done, and I can tell sort of like a story...**

Stacey loved telling stories about her life. Viewing her life as a completed whole that might then be remembered by others seemed to be reflected in how she approached the photography task and interview. A number of the photographs she chose to discuss were of other framed photographs or pictures that she had put on her bedroom walls to help her remember the past. She discussed photographs that represented a day-trip to Birmingham with her mother, a family holiday to Wales, a day at a local fair with her friends, and her contribution to a school production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. One represented a time when she was younger and ‘believed in Santa’. This selection of photographs represented different stages of her childhood

and adolescence and helped her with the retelling of her story or journey through life. Learning how to live a good life was also an important part of how she structured the story she told me. She now lived with her ‘two mums’ – adoptive parents who provided much needed love and support after the ‘tough stage’ she had lived through since social services had removed her from the home of her birth parents. Their influence in her life meant that she was determined to lead a good life and follow the ‘right path’, and to pass her knowledge of right and wrong on to others. She was dedicated to ‘going to Beavers’ and helping ‘little kids’, helping to ‘put them on the right path’. This was, she thought, a great opportunity to ‘learn what children are like’ and to gain experience for an imagined future career working with children and teaching them ‘right from wrong’.

3.22 William

Guitar, you can just play how you want. And you can have your own similar type of freedom aspect. And it’s just a nice way to sort of feel calm and feel comfortable, and it’s just a nice thing to do, really – a nice hobby.

Much of William’s experience of being a young person was concerned with making progress and looking forward to the future. He had taken a photograph to represent ‘schoolwork’ because of how this contributed to the ‘good life’ that he imagined lay ahead of him. The importance of making progress in life was also something that he enjoyed about the hobbies he had chosen to photograph and discuss. Karate was important to him because he was learning more skills and ‘gradually getting better and better through the grades’. He enjoyed the feeling of making progress in karate, but he would feel ‘unhappy’ and ‘on the verge of quitting’ whenever he failed a grade. The emphasis he placed on having ‘something you can look forward to’ also

suggested that he was not entirely happy with his present circumstances. He often felt the need to relieve ‘stress’ and this was why he enjoyed playing the guitar so much. As with karate, this was a ‘nicely skill-based’ activity in which he could see progress and development. But playing the guitar was also ‘soothing’ and ‘a nice way to relax’. He was not having guitar lessons or entering music exams, so playing it was simply something he did to amuse himself in his spare time, giving him in particular a sense of ‘freedom’. It therefore differed from other aspects of his life, and was a hobby in which he alone was able to observe the progress he made rather than having this measured and judged by others. It was, therefore, something he would ‘hold on to’, so that in the future it could still ‘be a nice hobby to do to get away from stress.’ For William, living a life that was so focused on trying to achieve future happiness meant that it was also nice to spend some time enjoying the present and the freedom to ‘play what I like on my guitar.’

3.23 Zoe

It’s like, with life you’re building up to it all the time. Like, what I think is that every day you’re learning, so you’re building up knowledge...

Zoe had taken a number of photographs to represent musical theatre, which was one of the most important things in her life. As well as appreciating the music and the stories that were told, getting involved in local productions had made her ‘a more confident speaker’ and better at ‘talking in front of other people’. She had also made ‘loads of friends’ because with each new production ‘someone else joins’ and becomes a ‘new friend’. She was most unhappy when she had ‘nothing planned’ and was ‘stuck at home’, and preferred spending time with her family and friends. But, as her experience of ‘musicals’ had helped her to build confidence and develop a degree of independence in life, Zoe now felt that if she was ‘having problems’ she would

prefer to 'sort it out' herself than depend on her family and friends. She had also made detailed plans for her future in theatre, as well as the backup plans of 'teaching' or 'hairdressing' because 'it might not always go to plan'. Keeping herself busy in the present and planning her future in detail also appeared to help her cope with her fear of dying. She liked to be 'organised and know when everything's happened', and this was part of the reason that death scared her – it was the 'one thing in life when you don't know it's going to happen'.

Conclusion

In describing what was important for the participants, this chapter has highlighted their individuality as well as the diversity within the group. This brief introduction to the participants is supplemented by the interview data contained in the following chapters. Chapter Four demonstrates how what was important for participants related to their efforts to lead authentic and meaningful lives, and Chapter Five explores how their experiences of life in the present were shaped by certain narratives from their pasts as well as those they told about their anticipated futures. Chapters Six to Eight consider how this cluster of themes relates to their constructions of religion and their reasons for having none.

Chapter Four: Self and Authenticity

Introduction

The search for *an overarching framework of* meaning and purpose for life might not be as important for many young people as some researchers of youth and religion have suggested. Rather than examining whether and how the young people who took part in this research articulate metaphysical or existential beliefs, meaning and purpose, the following two chapters are more concerned with what they consider to be *important* in life. These chapters explore what participants identify as matters of importance, focusing in this chapter on how these relate to the young people's sense of an authentic self, and on how they relate to participants' narratives about the past and the future in the next chapter.

After introducing Taylor's account of a person's self-interpretation as linked to what is important to them, this chapter presents my thematic analysis of the interview data, focusing on what participants said about the significance of 'being free', 'being themselves' and 'being connected'. This is followed by sections in which these themes are interpreted in relation to theoretical literature on authenticity. An exploration of the 'subjective turn of modern culture' (Taylor 1992:26) – in which ideas about being free to live authentically, guided by our consciences and 'true selves', became more influential in western societies – illuminates how participants considered being free to be themselves important. Although at times participants appeared to value their own personal freedom over the concerns of others, this investigation of the nature of self-authenticity demonstrates how these young people are living meaningful, authentic lives that are shaped by values and commitments that lie beyond the self, and which are dependent on the important connections they form in their relationships with others. The penultimate section of

the chapter explores the nature of these connections and attachments through a discussion of what Taylor describes as ‘webs of interlocution’ and the importance of a ‘defining community’ for the formation of identity (1989:36).

4.1 Young People, Self and Identity

The formation of a coherent identity is widely considered to be an important part of a young person’s life. The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (2004[1968]) argued that there were eight stages of psychosocial development within a normal human life span, and that it was necessary for young people to pass through the stage of identity formation during adolescence before entering adulthood. He was interested in exploring the relationship between the biological changes that occur at each of these stages and other contextual factors, such as societal demands, and it was the possible conflict between these that led him to use the term ‘crisis’ to describe each stage. As psychologist Laurence Steinberg writes, for Erikson, ‘the challenge of adolescence is to resolve the identity crisis and to emerge with a coherent sense of who one is and where one is headed’ (2011:14). But Erikson’s developmental approach assumes that at this time in life young people are all passing through a single identity crisis, that of identity formation, whereas scholars working within the ‘new social studies of childhood’ (James & Prout 1990) have sought to demonstrate the importance of understanding children and young people as ‘beings’ rather than ‘becomings’ (Lee 2001). Despite the impact of the biological changes that young people experience at this part of the life-course, scholars in this field argue that it is important to take account of the fact that childhood is ‘a social rather than simply a biological, and therefore developmental, construct’. Young people are ‘social actors/agents, with their own voices, who influence and are influenced’ by their social context (James & James 2012:42). Chapters Four and Five are concerned

with representing the ‘voices’ of participants as young people, and these are understood as expressive of their identities or, as we shall see, of their self-interpretations at the time of their interviews.

The philosopher Alison Weir describes Taylor as one of ‘the most important contemporary philosophers of modern identity’ (2013:22). He focuses on ‘first-person, subjective, affirmed identity’ rather than ‘third-person, or ascribed identity’ (2013:24).²⁷ Rather than analysing identity as a social category, Taylor instead focuses on the questions of meaning and purpose that we might ask ourselves. As Steinberg notes, during adolescence, young people make choices that require them to think about the answers to such questions as “‘What do I really want out of life?’” “‘What things are really important to me?’” “‘What kind of person would I really like to be?’” (2011:247). For Taylor, ‘our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not’ (1989:30). Like other young people, then, participants are understood to be making decisions about what matters that ‘raise questions about identity’ (Steinberg 2011:247).

Taylor often conflates the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’. He also treats ‘person’ and ‘subject’, as well as ‘selfhood’ and ‘personhood’, as synonyms. This is because, as philosopher Ruth Abbey notes, they all ‘relate to the wider question of what it is to be human’ (2000:57). This question involves the consideration and explication of one’s values, commitments and attachments:

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. ...these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to

²⁷ On the difference between these two types of identity see further Chapter Eight.

accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer (1989:34).

Taylor's concept of the self is concerned with self-interpretation, with the way that identity is worked out through our articulations of what matters to us and what helps us to make sense of our lives. For Taylor, our identities are 'defined by the commitments and identifications' that provide us with a 'frame or horizon' within which we are 'capable of taking a stand' (1989:27). This process involves not only taking 'a stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community' (1989:36). It is through self-interpretation that we understand not only who we are but also who we are in relation to others. The following sections present my thematic analysis of interview data about what participants considered to be important, understood, therefore, as self-interpretations in which they placed significance not only on being free to be themselves but on connections with their defining communities of family and friends.

4.2 Being Free to be Me

During our discussions about what was important, participants emphasised 'being true' to themselves, being able to be 'different' and 'unique', forging their own way in life, and not being influenced by others. Finding self-fulfilment in their true selves appeared to be a central preoccupation for some young people and occasionally seemed to be more important than consideration of the needs of other people. For example, Joanne told me that an important part of 'just being myself' involved 'doing things you want to do', which meant that at times she appeared to take a rather instrumental approach to her friendships. She had different friends to suit her

different interests and needs; there were friends from football who were different from her school friends, and these she divided into categories of the ‘popular people’, the ‘normal people’ and friends with whom she could ‘be weird and normal’. She was quite happy moving between these groups and assumed that this was something that she would continue to do throughout life; friends would come and go and, while it was important to enjoy her time with them, there was no need to work at forming lasting relationships because eventually they would all go their ‘separate ways’. Although Joanne’s approach to friendship might seem slightly self-serving, she also believed that part of being herself meant not changing her behaviour to suit each of the different groups she moved between. It was better to be honest with her friends because telling the truth about herself would prevent them from ‘getting hurt’.

Similarly, Abigail thought that it was wrong ‘to pretend to be something that you’re not’ and to lie ‘about who you are and what you do’ and Craig believed that ‘it’s good to always be yourself and never change for people’. For Daniel, being constant in his behaviour was necessary ‘even if other people criticise you for it’. Honesty, authenticity and consistency also helped participants to establish certainty, which was something that many thought was necessary for making sense of life. As it often seemed that there were many aspects of their lives that remained uncertain and beyond their control, being truthful about who they were by expressing what they valued and were committed to was an important part of being themselves. The notion of having a ‘true’ self that was ‘real’ in contrast to a ‘fake’ self was also often expressed by participants. It was this ‘true’ self that provided a solid foundation for their lives, and this was often thought to be expressed through art, music and fashion.

Katie often found it hard to ‘tell anyone anything’ but believed that she had become more confident at expressing herself through art and music. These had taught

her the importance of being ‘different’, which she thought was important because ‘you have to be true to yourself’ and ‘you can’t always be what other people want’. She described singing as being ‘true to me’. If other people did not like it, she could shake off their comments by responding that singing is ‘just me’. Discovering a way of expressing ‘who I am’ was also something that Martha and Karl described when they spoke of particular styles of dress that they felt revealed a truth about who they were. Martha believed it was more important to maintain her individuality and to truthfully express herself than be accepted by her classmates. But being different was not always easy for her:

I definitely think it’s a wrong to kind of change who you are, you know, just because someone doesn’t like it, you know? For example, at school, obviously, I can’t do it, but I’m a bit of a Goth at home. But, like, I used to have a friend who was, like, ‘weirdo’ and ‘you should wear this cos it’s fashionable’, but I don’t do fashion, I do this [laughs].

While Karl also wanted to be distinctive, he was more afraid of not being accepted by others. It was important to be the same as his friends and other people on social media and he wanted the clothes he wore at social events to be appropriate, as he thought this would help him to ‘probably get a bit more respect’ from his peers. Although ‘being unique’ was ‘quite a big part’ of his life, this sometimes required inspiration from other people, including celebrities, ‘new fashion and new trends’. ‘Do you know Russell Kane?’ he asked me. ‘Well, I used to try and look a bit like him.’ Although the manner in which some of the participants chose to be different varied, they all felt that being able to express this difference was an important part of being themselves.

While for most participants this freedom to be unique was a means of achieving self-fulfilment through discovering and expressing their true selves, at certain points during the interviews, participants also appeared to share the view that the pursuit of freedom was an important end in itself. Martha particularly enjoyed the freedom of opportunity she had in life and the sense of ‘not being limited by anything’ and Beth thought the desire to ‘do what we want’ was a fundamental human instinct. For Katie, doing something ‘that you want to do’ and living ‘the way you want to be’ whilst ‘not taking orders from someone’ and being free from other people’s ‘rules’ was considered to be ‘the purpose of life’. Fully experiencing life by being able to ‘do what you want to do’ was also important for Henry, who told me that a ‘happy’ life would be a ‘life which doesn’t involve me having to follow what someone says’. Although this might not be free from trouble, Henry thought it was better to suffer the consequences of making mistakes than not fully ‘experience things’. This approach to life was partly inspired by Jonas Jonasson’s novel *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared*. The adventures of its protagonist, Allan Karlsson, provided Henry with a template for how to live life:

[Karlsson] had no ideological values or religious values because he had grown up not to believe them, and I feel that’s kind of the person you should, you know, I think that’s how you should live your life because if you live your life without limits, like he did, things will happen, uncanny things which might be funny, might be sad ... And I just feel that is how life should be lived.

Karl had a similar understanding of being free, which he felt was encapsulated by the maxim ‘you only live once’. Following this motto meant that rather than carefully

considering how he should behave in different situations, he preferred not to ‘think about things’ and ‘just do them’:

It’s like I’ve got the concept of ‘you only live once’ in my head, and that kind of links to what I think is right and wrong, and kind of what I believe ... I always think, like, it’s my life, so I can do what I want and stuff ... I guess it’s just like do what you want and follow your dreams, really.

He tried to illustrate this approach to life with a story about his experience of travelling to Liverpool without his mother’s permission. As he had decided to go when the weather was particularly bad, it was not possible to return home by train and he had to call his mother and ‘tell her to pick me up’. Although this adventure was something that he regretted because his mother punished him by confiscating his mobile phone for two months, Karl enjoyed retelling the story as he felt it provided a good example of how he put his carefree philosophy into practice.

While it was possible to detect elements of an approach to life in which the search for self-fulfilment was elevated beyond all other concerns, Henry and Karl, like the other participants, also expressed concerns for the freedom of other people and supported the right for others to be free to choose how to live their lives in order to also discover their true selves. Alice, Craig, Ellie, Laura, Megan and Michael spoke of their awareness of the amount of injustice and suffering that people experienced each day, which was part of the reason that they thought it was important that everyone should have equal rights. Craig was particularly concerned with the ‘male dominance’ of some cultures where there are ‘women who have no rights’, and thought that it should not matter whether you were male or female, rich or poor – everyone should be treated with the same level of dignity and respect. Daniel, David, Leah, Rachel and William all spoke of how they had been inspired by

Martin Luther King, whose life they thought provided a particularly powerful example of how to combat injustice and inequality and they were in favour of peaceful opposition to this type of oppression. Although none of them discussed the influence of Christianity on the civil rights activist, they felt that the changes he brought about for future generations meant that he represented what a good life should be. But the young people were not uncritical of some of the choices people in modern societies make, nor were they in favour of completely unrestricted freedom. Abigail recognised the need for ‘freedom within reason’ because, although she thought that you ‘should be able to do what you want because it’s your life’, limitations on freedom were also necessary in order to be truly free. This was a view shared by Leah, who thought that not having ‘exact freedom’ – by which she meant the ‘freedom to kill or anything’ – was necessary to ‘make you free’.

It was this understanding of being free within the limits of society that was most widely expressed. They understood that some choices were better than others and that these could be measured against certain criteria. This was reflected in what they said about their ethical outlook and everyday behaviour. They were against racist or homophobic bullying and opposed to religious or political extremism, and they also thought it was wrong to steal or be dishonest in one’s dealings with others. This was not simply because they were afraid of getting caught or of what other people might think of them, but because they were aware of how other people would feel if they behaved in a selfish or anti-social manner. This also signalled the importance they placed on being in relationship with other people.

4.3 Being Connected

The majority of the participants felt that either one or both of their parents were the people with whom they had the most important relationships. Nick appreciated how

indispensable his parents were. They were ‘always there for me, no matter what’ and were ‘always providing’ for him. Stacey’s adoptive mother was the most important person in her life because, ‘she influences me how to live my life’, and both Ellie and Leah felt that they would not know what to do without their parents. As Leah forcefully stated, ‘they’re like the main cause of everything that I have cos otherwise I’d have nothing’. Her mother and father were the ‘most important people’ in her life and without them she would not ‘bother to do anything’. Throughout her interview, she appeared uncertain and insecure about many aspects of her life, and her family seemed essential in this regard. When she felt sad or alone, she found comfort in surrounding herself with everyday household objects that she associated with her family and her home. The familial support Leah felt even when her family were not physically present was similar to Rachel’s need to ‘sort of pray’ to her deceased grandparents, especially when she felt ‘there’s no one around that I can trust’:

I sort of pray to think about them and wish that they could hear me or see me and I wish to know what they think about me and stuff like that ... I just put my hands together and I just sort of talk to myself and say what I’ve always wanted to say to the people who’ve meant a lot to me that I haven’t actually got to say goodbye to.

These prayers made her feel she was ‘being listened to’ and provided a way for her to ‘get it all out’.

The importance of being able to share secrets with other trusted people was also why a number of participants spoke of the importance of close relationships with their siblings and friends, especially as they could share things with them that they would not wish to disclose to the adults in their lives. This was one of the most important aspects of Laura’s relationship with her sister: ‘although I talk to my mum

and dad and things, I know I can always talk to my sister about things that I might not want to tell them.’ Relationships with close friends provided a similar sense of security, especially when participants were experiencing difficulties at home. Nick described his friends as ‘a surrogate family’, and told me that within his friendship group ‘everyone just helps each other with whatever problems they’ve got’. His friends were ‘always there for you’ and ‘you can be a lot more open with them’ than one can be with family. For Craig, friends were important because ‘they’re who you talk to when you’re having problems, and you help them when they’re having problems’. The importance of this mutual support was also something that Ellie appreciated. She felt that only her best friend properly understood her life ‘cos we’ve both had a lot of stuff going down recently’, and so it was important to be able to talk to her, especially when she felt unable to talk to her family about some of the problems that she was experiencing at home.

An important part of Ellie’s relationship was that it was built on trust, which was something that many participants considered to be essential for their day-to-day lives. For example, Henry said that trust was an ‘important thing’ in life and he went on to list a number of social relations in which trust figured highly for him:

I trust my family to be able to look after me. I trust my friends to be able to, you know, to be sympathetic, not to hide things, or to tell me if something’s happened. ... I also trust that if I’m talking to people or playing games that they will be able to talk back to me, or there’s a strong connection link with the internet, I can, you know, stay with them and talk to them and play with them and that’s another social element.

Trust helped participants to manage their interactions with other people at school and in their free time. For Ben, for example, the importance of an activity like climbing

was that it ‘develops trust with people’. Before he became a Scout, he thought that he was ‘a good team player’, but his experiences on the climbing wall at camp had strengthened this belief: ‘you’ve got to trust the person who’s holding you to keep you on the wall and keep you safe’. Knowing that they could trust their family and friends was necessary for feeling both physically and emotionally secure and stable in life. When asked about what made her feel better when she felt unhappy, Rachel talked about the importance of having a trusted person like her social worker to confide in: ‘I say something to someone about how I feel and they talk to me and reassure [me] that everything’s going to be okay’. When she feels unable to talk to ‘a teacher or a friend, or a parent to trust, I can go to them and that will stay between us two and they won’t share it with anyone else’. For some of the participants, important relationships of trust also extended to the animals in their lives. Alice chose to take photographs of her cats, because she felt that her relationship with them were important to her. But these images also enabled her to talk about people in her life who seemed to act from ulterior motives because, with her cats, it was different:

...with them there would be no reason really behind what they do. If they didn’t want to be friendly they wouldn’t be friendly, but they are, and I like that... I think that’s nice that they trust you even though they can’t communicate with you.

Trusting relationships with pets, friends and family were closely linked to issues of loyalty, and both were particularly important at different times in participants’ lives. For example, what Megan talked about in our interview seemed particularly influenced by being bullied at school. While she thought that her immediate family were always ‘there for support’, it was her relationship with her grandfather that had helped in this situation. While her family would give advice that was not always

welcome – ‘they’d be like, “just go and beat them up, go and beat them up” and make jokes, but it doesn’t help’ – her grandfather could better empathise with her experiences, as he had also been bullied when younger and, therefore, knew ‘what he’s talking about’. But Megan also stressed that ‘the most important thing’ to her grandfather was ‘loyalty’, and she shared his beliefs about loyalty in relationships, recognising the importance of feeling safe and secure and the need to be surrounded by people she loved and trusted.

Forming relationships with other people were often understood by participants as making ‘connections’. Stacey felt that she and her mother ‘connect very well’, and one of the reasons Abigail enjoyed making people laugh was because ‘you’ve instantly got a connection with them’. For Katie, an important aspect of singing was that it helped her to ‘connect’ with the artist who wrote the song, and making and maintaining connections with other people in life was a recurrent theme in her interview. Although she recognised how important it was that her mother had ‘always been there’ for her, she also felt that she would have a stronger sense of belonging to a family when her mother and step-father got married. She currently felt like the ‘odd one out’ because she was ‘not really his daughter’, and so she would ‘feel more connected when they’re married’ and become a ‘family’. She also thought that spending time with her baby brother and sister was helping her to ‘emotionally connect with other people’. But Katie also seemed unsure of the strength of some of the other connections in her life, and would therefore try to reinforce these whenever possible. One of the photographs she had taken was of her laptop, which she chose to represent maintaining contact with family members. She had used Facebook to get in touch with her step-brother and sister, and liked being able to ‘connect with other people and stay in touch with them’ in this way. She worried about the possibility

that in the future she might lose the close connections and ties she had made with her family, even though her parents had tried to reassure her that they would ‘always want to talk to me and contact me, no matter what’.

This type of loss was something that a number of participants seemed concerned about. For Henry, the possibility that at some point in the future he might lose the close connection that he had with a friend, such that there might be ‘no interaction’, was ‘a scary thought’, especially when ‘you look back at what you’ve talked about or what you’ve been through together’. Jack also felt that making connections with other people was important and was now more committed and dedicated to maintaining these connections than to anything else in life. Having been let down by people in the past, it was important for him to ensure that these friendships lasted. This meant that, whereas in the past he might have been temporarily frustrated if he lost his Game Boy or ran out of batteries, his description of the theft of his iPhone at a New Year’s Eve party seemed to have much more serious implications for his new more sociable life:

I had no phone or anything, so I was, like, completely disconnected from everybody. I’d, like, use my iPhone to listen to music and to talk to people and everything, so if I’m, like, disconnected from everybody and everything, I can’t talk to friends or family or anyone.

Although Jack had spent much of his childhood obsessed with technology and video games, the transformation of his social life in the last few years meant that, rather than being disheartened by the loss of a particular piece of replaceable technology, he seemed more upset by the sense of disconnection he felt after losing a device upon which he relied for immediate communication and connection with family and friends.

Participants also placed high importance on actively helping other people and contributing to their wider communities by supporting human and animal welfare causes about which they felt strongly. For example, Martha spent a lot of free time ‘campaigning against certain things’, and was committed to supporting her local donkey sanctuary, even to the point of helping prevent two of their rehabilitated donkeys from being forcefully taken from them. Alice also shared Martha’s love of animals and had made the decision to become a vegetarian. She had taken photographs of her favourite meat substitute products to represent this recent change in her lifestyle, explaining that this had been partly motivated by what she understood as her position and role in a larger universe. As she believed that ‘we all evolved’ and ‘started off as bacteria’, human beings should not ‘feel we have the right to decide we’re in charge’. She felt a debt of gratitude to ‘all the animals that came before us’ and believed that it was therefore wrong to ‘treat them badly’. Laura had a similar concern for the environment and would always ‘recycle everything’. She was also determined to help people who were less fortunate than her and was inspired by what she saw as the selflessness of people involved in volunteering overseas. For many of the participants, then, rather than being focused solely on their own self-fulfilment, they were willing to restrict their choices and to sacrifice certain freedoms in order to lead lives more connected to other people, animals and the planet. Being free to choose how to live did not mean that they lost sight of the demands that important social relationships or social concerns placed upon them and which helped them to form meaningful connections beyond the self.

Many participants felt that it was the stability and support that they received from their families that gave them the freedom and confidence to experiment with being ‘different’ or ‘unique’, helping them to feel more autonomous while offering a

measure of continuity and consistency. For example, Joanne's family were of central importance to her life and allowed her to feel confident enough not to need particularly close friendship groups. The self-assurance she required to be able to go her 'separate way' and to effectively end relationships with friends from school (as she supposed she inevitably would when she left) was made possible by the presence of a supporting family. She thought that she was most able to be herself at home, where she felt 'safe', and this security allowed her to enjoy time alone as well as with family members, especially her elder brother whom she could 'trust' and felt 'safe around'. Similarly, Karl's story about secretly travelling to Liverpool without his mother's permission illustrated how much he was also dependent on the stability, security and boundaries that his mother provided for him, which enabled him to be free to fully express himself and follow his philosophies of 'you only live once' and 'follow your dreams'. Although Henry spoke of his love of freedom and the excitement of living a life 'without limits', the security and support he felt from having a small group of loyal friends and being close to his family was fundamental to his experience of being a young person.

The next sections of this chapter explore how the participants' self-interpretations are related to theoretical literature on self-authenticity and the significance of personal relationships in the formation of identities. It engages with theorists who have helped me to make sense of the themes of self, authenticity, freedom and the importance of attachments and connections that emerged from the data. I examine Taylor's notion of the subjective turn and how the importance of self-fulfilment has often led people to search for a 'trivialised' form of authenticity, followed by a discussion of the importance Taylor places on the need for connections to things that matter, including defining communities, which help us to lead

meaningful and authentic lives. I relate this to the values and commitments of the young people who participated in this research.

4.4 The Subjective Turn

Taylor observes what he terms ‘the massive subjective turn of modern culture’ (1992:26) and describes it in *The Ethics of Authenticity* as a new form of individualism, according to which:

...everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfilment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content (1992:14).

This ‘individualism of self-fulfilment’ now forms part of a cultural turn to a ‘new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner-depths’ (1992:26), but the roots of this belief in the importance of expressing what lies within – what Taylor terms ‘expressivism’ (1989:374) – can be found in the Romanticism of early nineteenth century Europe. As Heelas and Woodhead observe, the subjective turn is ‘away from life lived in terms of external or “objective” roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences’ (2005:2). These inner experiences are considered to be more valuable and reliable than external sources of authority:

The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one’s own authority. Not to follow established paths, but to forge one’s own inner-directed, as subjective, life. Not to become what others want one to be, but to ‘become who I truly am’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:4).

Becoming one's own authority is often understood as a central part of trying to live authentically. In his study of the notion of authenticity, the anthropologist Charles Lindholm writes that challenges to external authorities, orders and 'taken-for-granted meaning systems' leads 'human beings everywhere ... to recapture a degree of significance and stability, often enough by inventing or affirming a form of authenticity they can claim for themselves' (2008:144-5). This term is often used to describe 'objects, persons, and collectives' that are 'original, real and pure' and the search for authenticity is often considered to be a worthy ideal and 'an absolute value in contemporary life' (2008:1-2). But it has also been criticised: when authenticity as an inward turn is considered to be more important than discovering oneself through meaningful interactions with 'things that matter', it can lead to what Taylor describes as 'degraded' and 'trivialised' forms of authenticity that are based entirely on self-fulfilment (1992:40,29). This type of individualism has been detected in the search for an authentic way of being advocated in some forms of psychotherapy and the self-help industry (Giddens 1991; Rose 1998; Guignon 2004), but it is also believed to extend beyond this, having a more pervasive effect on modern western societies (Bloom 1988; Lash 1991).

Although the modern ideal of living authentically has often been concerned with the search within, the aim of those who have sought guidance from the interior life has not always been this more 'shallow' understanding of authenticity as purely self-fulfilment. As the philosopher Charles Guignon notes, this was not how 'inward-turning' was understood by Augustine, for example, for whom it was only a 'means to making contact with and relating ourselves to the Being through whom we first come to be and at any time are' (2004:17). In other words, it was about interaction with and orienting oneself towards that which is original, real, pure, that which is of

ultimate importance, that which is authentic. Paradoxically, part of the reason that the search for authenticity has become so important is that earlier forms of meaning, such as belief in God, have lost their significance within our 'secular age' (Taylor 2007): 'now the source we have to connect with is deep in us' (Taylor 1992:26). But, without an awareness of something greater than us as a matter of importance, 'inward-turning' can sometimes amount to little more than the search for self-fulfilment. According to Taylor, this is the consequence of the 'displacement of the moral accent' of authenticity (1992:26). For Augustine, a relationship with God was necessary for leading a moral life, but, Taylor argues, since the seventeenth century, rather than seeking help from God through inward reflection, people have chosen to turn to themselves as sources of moral guidance.

Relying solely on our consciences for guidance in the world was a belief that was popularised through influential readings of the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As Guignon notes, Rousseau never denied 'the existence or grandeur of God' (2004:5), but he did appear to believe that it was more important to follow the voice of nature within than seek guidance on how to live from other sources of authority. For Rousseau, 'when we act on our feelings, we are doing as God would do' (Guignon 2004:58), and so rather than relying on God or society for guidance on how to live our lives, we should listen to our own conscience. By the end of the eighteenth century, the belief that 'human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong' had become well established in European society. This was also believed to be a more honest way of living and it was only by listening to this 'intuitive feeling' that we could truthfully express ourselves: 'being in touch takes on independent and crucial moral significance' (Taylor 1992:26).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the notion of a ‘true self’ emerged in particular when the young people interviewed in this study discussed the importance of facing moral dilemmas and making ethical decisions. A number of participants spoke of how they often had a sense of what was right or wrong. Abigail, for example, spoke of the importance of ‘listening’ to what she described as the ‘one true conscience of your own’ that ‘develops after time as you grow as a person’. Rather like Rousseau’s notion of listening to the ‘voice within’ (Taylor 1992:26), participants would often describe physical responses to their consciences. Daniel was able to ‘feel’ what was right and wrong: if he ever felt he was doing something wrong his ‘body just, like, tenses a bit’. And Martha believed that her ‘stomach screws itself up inside’ her every time she did something wrong. Although they often chose not to seek help from external sources of authority, making the right decision was not always easy. As Alice observed, ‘sometimes you do choose to do the wrong thing because it’s easier’, but this was something that she and many other participants believed was solely their decision and responsibility. In ethical matters, Rachel believed that having the freedom ‘to make your own decision is a lot more empowering than having others do it for you’, and although Daniel knew it was easier to follow other people, ultimately, he believed it was better to make ‘your own choices’. Ben believed that his conscience ‘shows you the right path to take’ and helped him decide what to do. It was both important to be free to choose and to take responsibility for the choices he made. For many of the participants, relying on their consciences or their ‘gut feeling’ to help them make ethical decisions in life was more important than relying on external sources of authority. This was an important part of being their authentic selves.

Rousseau not only emphasised the importance of turning inward and listening to our consciences for guidance on how to live, but also believed that turning inwards helped him to fully experience life. He thought that modern society ‘thwarts’ the desire ‘to feel life’ (Lindholm 2008:8) and that by living in such an environment we had lost an important part of our original and true nature; now we were concerned only with how we appeared to others and with what our fellow citizens possessed. It was therefore necessary to become free of these limitations and decide for ourselves how to live. Taylor describes this belief in the importance of being free to do what we want without restriction as ‘self-determining’ freedom, which goes much further than the notion of ‘negative liberty’, in which ‘I am free to do what I want without interference by others’ only to the extent that ‘this is compatible with my being shaped and influenced by society and its laws of conformity’. Self-determining freedom, by contrast, ‘demands that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone’. Taylor argues that freedom as self-determination was most fully developed in the philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder, who ‘put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human’ (1992:27-8). This emphasis on our own originality has become an essential part of the modern ideals of authenticity, self-fulfilment and self-realisation. This is often believed to be something that we alone can discover for ourselves. As Taylor writes, it is ‘something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potential that is properly mine’ (1992:29).

For Taylor, the freedom to live this way is a consequence of ‘breaking loose from older moral horizons’ (1992:3). Part of his analysis of modern identity involves consideration of what might broadly be described as ‘moral questions’, which are questions about ‘what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling’ and ‘worth living’

(1989:4). Our responses to these are informed by a number of sources. Alongside Judaeo-Christian theism and ‘disengaged reason’ (1989:143), Taylor considers Romantic expressivism to be one of ‘three domains’ of ‘moral sources’ that have influenced the moral questions asked by modern western societies and that, in turn, have impacted modern western identities (1989:495). The young people who participated in this research all believed in the importance of being free, following their consciences, and being true to themselves – values and commitments drawn from the domain of Romantic expressivism, which has influenced the modern ideal of leading original, authentic lives that express something of the true or real self that lies within. Although there are ‘profound rifts’ between these three domains, ‘they are continually borrowing from and influenced by each other’, which means that our identities today appear to have been shaped by a combination of each of these three sources. So, for example, Taylor suggests that, while the ‘original unity of the theistic horizon has been shattered’, when we uphold beliefs in ‘universal benevolence and justice’, we continue to draw from religious traditions, even though many of us no longer follow them (1989:496).

Romantic expressivism, resultant notions of the authentic self and the wider subjective trend within modern societies have also been shaped by the influence of the ‘scientific outlook’ that has become more influential culturally since the sixteenth century. In this view, ‘there are no boundaries to human mastery over nature’ and therefore ‘humans can remake the world to a rational plan, which means that they can remake themselves as they wish’ (Guignon 2004:33). Having rejected the constraints imposed by older systems of meaning, there is, as Guignon observes, a tendency within the modern outlook to view this freedom as the highest ideal: ‘Modern humanity finds that there is no higher end than freedom, where this is seen

as the unrestricted ability to choose whatever one wants' (2004:44). This means that 'self-worth is based on the dignity of being a self-directed, effective actor in the world', which means that 'autonomy and self-direction, being the captain of your own ship', is often considered to be more important than depending on our relationships with others (2004:150). However, Taylor also proposes that it is only possible to lead authentic and meaningful lives by recognising the importance of our relationships with others and the different ways that we respond to their demands.

4.5 Self-in-Relation

Attempting to live authentically by searching for a real self within us that remains distinct from the identities we form in relation to others is a mistake. Being an authentic self involves 'self-in-relation rather than a self-in-isolation' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:11). Our beliefs about moral questions, as well as our sense of self, depend on what Taylor refers to as a 'defining moral community':

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding – and, of course, these classes overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'. ... The full definition of someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matter but also some reference to a defining community (1989:36).

For the young people who participated in this research, being free to live their lives without limits was sometimes considered to be a worthy aim that provided purpose to their lives. But they were also aware of the value of relationships with others, and recognised that it was through these relationships that they felt able to pursue their

goals of living freely and being different or unique. It was often only because of the support and stability they received from their relationships with others that they were able to assert their independence and difference. Further, while they viewed freedom and choice as central in being true to themselves, they also understood that both were limited by society. They depended on their consciences to help them to judge the most ethical course of action to take, but they also often believed that much of what they knew about right and wrong had been assimilated when they were younger from their parents and teachers or in reference to what Taylor would call a defining community.

Alice believed that her morals had been ‘instilled by her family’ and, as she would follow the rules of her parents, she would behave as they would ‘in terms of what’s good and what’s bad and right and wrong’, and Ellie thought that her ‘mum and dad have always taught me right from wrong’. When asked where she acquired her sense of right and wrong, Beth thought that much of it was ‘common sense’ and that what remained had been taught by her parents, who had in turn been taught ‘what to do and what not to do’ by her grandparents. Martha tried to ‘avoid being bad or doing any wrongs’ partly because of her mother’s influence and her desire to ‘make her proud’. Some participants also suggested that their beliefs about right and wrong were also acquired through their education. As Jack observed, ‘when you start school and stuff, like in nursery and stuff, you get taught, I don’t know, like, don’t throw things across the classroom and things like that’. He thought that knowing how to behave appropriately ‘gradually’ becomes ‘second nature’, a view shared by Michael, who thought that it was learnt as part of one’s development: ‘I guess as you grow, you just sort of automatically learn your morals’. Michael thought that this becomes easier over time through acquiring particular sets of values from ‘family

and friends' that enable him to feel confident enough to determine the most ethical course of action to take in any particular situation. For many of the participants, therefore, the relationships with their family and friends formed defining communities that were of fundamental importance in providing this sort of guidance on how to live their lives.

For Taylor, we are selves in relation to others, dependent on the physical and psychological relationships we form with other people. These relationships help shape our identities by influencing the way we think about the world, affecting the choices and decisions we make, how we behave and much of what we believe. He argues that what we consider to be of value and meaning to our lives has not only been shaped by dialogue with significant others but also by the non-verbal interactions that take place in our minds with imagined others. Some participants – like Rachel, who prayed to her deceased grandparents, or Leah, who took comfort from surrounding herself with objects she associated with memories of her family – spoke about their loved ones in ways that illustrate what Taylor refers to as the 'dialogical' nature of the 'human mind' (1992:33). Webs of interlocution and defining communities are made up of both physical and psychological relationships formed with others both real and imagined. It is from within such complex networks that we make choices about the things that matter to us and from which we construct self-interpretations:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial (1992:40).

Because of this world of relationships, ‘some options are more significant than others’ for us. When we do not recognise this, ‘the very idea of self-choice’ – on which the subjective turn depends – ‘falls into triviality and hence incoherence’ (1992:39). It is only through these connections to things that matter that it is possible for us to live meaningful, authentic lives. As Weir writes:

For Taylor, our lives have meaning only insofar as we experience ourselves as importantly connected: to our defining communities, to our background horizons, to our ideals and goods...A life without meaning is a life in which one is not importantly connected to anything, or anyone. And being connected means *identifying* oneself *with*: a past or tradition, with defining communities, with values or ideals, with a future one can imagine or foresee (2013:34).

As the sociologist Craig Calhoun notes, however, Taylor does tend to emphasise the importance of the intellectual traditions and horizons over our personal relationships in the formation of our identities. But the significance of the latter should not be ignored:

Our moral motivations ... derive in large part not from abstract reason about what is right in general, but from concrete, highly immediate, and even embodied sensitivity to how our actions fit into the relationships we most value. The relationships themselves – parent/child, spouse, mentor, friend – become moral sources, not as ideas of the good but as orienting, constitutive goods (1991:261-2).

The relationships participants formed with others were important not only because they influenced their moral motivations, but because they also provided a foundation on which they were able to make sense of their day-to-day lives. As these

relationships had helped them to feel confident enough to become more independent, and to enjoy being different or unique, the possibility that they might at some point lose these important connections concerned them and it was often thought this would lead to a sense of meaninglessness and to a loss of purpose in life.

Conclusion

Although participants did not express a need for a single overarching secular or religious framework in which to orient their lives, this did not mean that they were lacking meaning and purpose. What they valued, were committed to and formed attachments with, helped them lead meaningful, purposeful and authentic lives. Sometimes they expressed the need for more independence, believing they could resolve problems themselves by following their inner consciences rather than relying on external sources of authority. While the young people who took part in this research wanted to be free to fully experience life without limits, to enjoy life fully and not think too much about the consequences of their actions, they also understood how fortunate they were to enjoy this type of freedom and recognised the need for the secure foundations that their relationships with families and friends provided for them. When many other aspects of the young people's lives seemed uncertain, it was important to be able to feel confident in their own abilities and judgements but also to be secure in the knowledge that they were supported by their relationships with others.

An examination in Chapter Five of the participants' positive and negative experiences of the past and their hopes and fears for the future continues to explore how participants felt about and dealt with the uncertainties of their present lives. In Chapters Six to Eight, the themes from these two chapters are explored further by highlighting how matters of importance related to constructions of and relationships

of difference to religion. In particular, concerns that following a religion would conflict with their own search for an authentic self or path in life and that they could lose important connections with others – which this chapter has framed as participants’ subjective turn and their defining communities – emerges as a significant influence on their constructions of religion (Chapter Six) and their adaptation of beliefs from religious traditions (Chapter Seven).

Chapter Five: Time and Narrative

Introduction

When discussing what was important to them, participants would often describe both the influence of past experiences and the impact of their imagined futures on their values and commitments. In both their discussions of the photographs and their responses to questions, the young people would often share stories that appeared to provide a coherent and meaningful structure to their lived experiences of the past and of the future. This chapter explores how they made sense of the past and future through specific narratives and how this process influenced their self-interpretations in the present, understood as those self-interpretations shared at the time of their interviews. After providing an overview of the participants' stories and presenting my thematic analysis of the interview data, focusing on participants' narratives of the past, the future and the significance of self-improvement in their lives, I discuss the theoretical literature on narrative and the formation of identity that helped me to interpret this data. I use in particular Ricoeur's examination of the relationship between time and narrative. Applying his mimetic process for interpreting narrative to the interview data elucidates some of the ways in which these young people 'emplot' their lives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how participants configure matters of importance into significant narratives, paving the way for the exploration in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight of how the specific narratives identified in this chapter have also informed their constructions of religion, their beliefs about life after death, the supernatural and prayer, and their reasons for reporting 'no religion'.

According to the Strawson, there is 'a widespread agreement' across a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences 'that human beings typically

see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories' (2004:428). Viewing one's life as a story provides it with a coherence and unity that would otherwise be absent. Our identity requires such a structure; without it we would lose all sense of direction and purpose in life. This is the view taken by Taylor, who suggests that, in order to develop 'a sense of who we are', it is necessary to 'have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going', which is best achieved if we 'grasp our lives in a narrative' (1989:47). This provides a unity to our lives that enables us to 'orient ourselves to the good' (1989:51). Taylor believes that, by situating our experiences in a larger context and 'understanding our lives in a narrative form' (1989:52), we are better able to make sense of past events and of our imagined futures, which makes narrative a particularly suitable medium for our self-interpretations.

Participants told stories about their pasts throughout the interviews, whilst trying to illustrate why certain phenomena were important to them and when answering later questions. While participants were specifically asked towards the end of the interview, 'What are your plans/hopes for the future?' and 'What sort of life do you want to live?', the young people also told me about their anticipated futures at earlier points, especially when sharing reflections on growing up, adulthood and the desire for their own families; relating schoolwork and hobbies to personal ambitions and career aspirations; and how not knowing what the future would bring made them feel. In telling stories about past experiences, participants constructed narratives providing security and stability in present circumstances. Stories of both positive and negative experiences figured in the construction of narratives about the importance of living in the present. Difficult past experiences were retold in their construction of narratives about overcoming obstacles, not repeating past mistakes, the need to

protect others, and to prove wrong those who had bullied or criticised them, or otherwise let them down. Participants also appeared to be influenced by the stories of other people in constructing their own narratives about their future lives. These included stories about celebrities' lives or the character arcs of works of fiction, but were primarily the narratives that they had grown up with based on the expectations of their parents and society. The wider cultural narrative of self-improvement and success in later life was a particularly influential narrative appearing to affect how they perceived their pasts, how they occupied their time in the present, and what worried or excited them about their anticipated futures.

While participants most often shared stories to illustrate particular episodes from their pasts, some also chose to interpret the whole of their lives as narratives, with Abigail and Stacey in particular approaching the photography task and the interview as an opportunity to share what they described as their 'life stories'. Broadly, then, participants grasped their lives in a narrative, taking what theorists call a narrative approach to their self-interpretations. As 'form-finding' is considered to be an important element of narrative construction (Strawson 2004), these young people found that making sense of their pasts and their futures was helped by forming short stories about their experiences, which aided in the construction of broader narratives that related to their present self-interpretations.

5.1 Narratives of the Past

Participants would often tell stories and fashion wider narratives about their pasts which then helped them to construct self-interpretations in the present. Sometimes these were positive stories from the recent past that demonstrated the strength of their relationships with family and friends. For example, Stacey, who seemed to understand each of the different events in her life as stories, had photographed

framed pictures in her bedroom that represented happy experiences from her recent past and that helped her construct a narrative about the security she felt from her present family situation. One of these prompted what she described as the ‘longest story ever’ – an account of a time when she and her adoptive mother visited a ‘beautiful gallery’, an experience that illustrated for her how ‘family means so much’ and how she and her mother ‘connect very well’.

Sometimes participants drew on elements from their more distant familial pasts to construct narratives that would help them to feel secure in their current home and school contexts and to cope with the difficulties of the present. For example, Rachel, who was experiencing serious difficulties with her mother at the time of the interview, said that her family was ‘the most important thing in life’. For her, problems of the present were eased slightly by reflecting on the more positive yet more distant past of her family – four out of six of her photographs were of things she associated with her father’s childhood or her grandparents’ lives, illustrating the importance of maintaining ‘a lot of links’ to the ‘family past’ by learning their stories and talking about them with her living relatives. But Rachel would also carry out a simple ritual that helped her to forget and move on from the more difficult episodes in her recent past. She told me:

...sometimes if I can’t stop thinking about something, if I write it down, the things that have really annoyed me or things I want to forget, I just burn it and I just watch it, cos you can just see it burning and disappearing, and you feel like in a way it’s just gone out of your system and you can move on with things and you feel a lot better about it...

Rachel was able to feel better about difficult experiences by focusing instead on positive episodes from her more distant familial past or by returning to hard times in

order to burn them away. But other participants recalled or retold stories about their pasts in order to provide their experiences with a coherence that made them feel more positive about negative episodes in their pasts and to construct wider narratives that contributed to their present self-interpretations, their goals for the future and their approaches to life more broadly. Through retelling difficult experiences from the past, narratives were formed about overcoming obstacles, avoiding the repetition of past mistakes, protecting others and proving wrong people who had upset them or let them down.

Seeing the interview as an opportunity to reflect upon and re-evaluate past negative experiences from a safe distance, participants selected stories that re-worked these experiences into salutary lessons that had helped them to develop into stronger and more purposeful young people. For example, family and friends played an important role in Henry's narratives, but his past experiences of being bullied meant that bullies, as well as teachers, also became significant people dominating the narrative he constructed about the importance of overcoming obstacles now and in the future and of the importance of not repeating past mistakes. Despite feeling let down by his teachers at the time, he learnt more about the value of trusting his family and friends from the love and support they showed him. Being bullied therefore influenced how he now interpreted his own behaviour as well as other people in his life, leading to a narrative about the importance of making good choices in life now. He said: 'I think the most important thing in your life is [long pause] your choices and the way that you treat people'. He regretted some of his own choices and acknowledged that he had 'done things in the past which I'm not proud of'. He also believed that past mistakes might haunt him later in life and, because 'what happened

in the past is irreversible', this led to the desire to carefully think through decisions made in the present.

Martha constructed a similar narrative about the importance of overcoming obstacles in life. She believed that it was important to fight for what is right and to protect others, even though this approach had in the past affected her relationships with others, especially at school. She said that she often seemed to alienate other pupils because she felt compelled to intervene in situations when something was wrong, but she interpreted some of the negative consequences of these interventions as simply part of a broader narrative of protecting loved ones in trouble that gave meaning to a number of aspects of her life, including her hobbies of 'fencing, archery, shooting and aikido' – all chosen because of the importance of 'protecting things'. For Martha, it was also necessary to struggle and fight in order to succeed in life. This narrative was influenced by significant people in her life today, such as her family and her peers, but it was particularly constructed during the interview in relation to stories she told me about her past experiences. Primary education had particularly influenced her goals for the future. She felt that her primary school teachers had not provided adequate support for her dyslexia, which meant she eventually turned to a private tutor for help. Although she now excelled academically, this negative experience still haunted her, and so whenever she did particularly well at school she would return to her old teachers and tell them about it:

And it was quite funny cos when I got my mocks and I got all my A's and stuff I was, like, 'yes!' And I went and found my primary school teacher and said, 'Hey sir, look at this!' [laughs] So that's kind of satisfying, so yeah, I did that and that was very pleasing [laughs]

She was worried about her GCSEs and thought she would be ‘devastated with anything less than an “A”’, but studying to become a vet at an ‘esteemed’ university like Cambridge helped keep her motivated in her work. Striving to achieve this goal helped her to interpret her past more positively and to construct a narrative about being able in the future to prove wrong those who she felt had let her down. One day returning to her primary school to say, ‘I’m going to Cambridge!’ provided the anticipated ending to her narrative about a battle for recognition with educational figures of her past.

Some participants seemed reluctant to talk in detail about some of their past experiences. For example, Joanne often shared very little when talking about her experiences of visiting a fortune teller and of hearing stories about ghosts. These were moments in her past that had caused her to doubt herself, which made her feel unsure about previously held certainties. She also had little interest in her future life, as something equally uncertain. This was a clear contrast to those parts of the interview in which she was happy to talk at length about time spent with her mother and brother. A wider narrative about the importance of focusing on the present therefore appeared to enable her to avoid the uncertainties involved in either reflecting on the past or contemplating the future and instead to ‘just think about the day and how it goes’ and ‘enjoy that day’. Karl similarly constructed a narrative about the importance of the present day. He thought that ‘going with the flow’ was important because ‘you only live once’ and ‘you might die tomorrow’. It was therefore best not to ‘really think about the next day’. However, this narrative also appeared to function as a way of insulating himself from difficult experiences of the past, so that thoughts about his experience of bullying at a previous school would not interfere with his present life. Alice shared a similar narrative about the importance

of enjoying her life and relishing each moment, because ‘you’ll never get the day back’ and ‘you can only live the day you’re in’. While she recognised that her life was short and that it was therefore imperative to make the most of each moment, she was also aware that her present enjoyment of life was contingent on events in the past. She was full of ‘awe’ and appreciation for her existence, owing a debt to her ancestors who had ‘lived through world wars’ and ‘famines’ and who had ‘passed their genes on to me’, which ‘could have just as easily not happened’. She would also often express wonder and amazement at how vast the universe was and at how her own life would only occupy a tiny fragment within a great expanse of time from the Big Bang onwards, and this realisation seemed to strengthen her resolve not to ‘waste this opportunity’ she had been ‘given’ by her family.

5.2 Narratives of the Future

As well as telling stories based on past experiences to aid present self-interpretation, some participants, like Martha whose future triumphant return to her primary school would be her ‘revenge’ against those who had ‘destroyed’ her, related these stories to the anticipated shape of their future lives. In the process, they constructed narratives about the importance of freedom and independence in adulthood, of one day having a family of their own, of leaving the future open to surprises, and of constructing over the course of their lives a life that was good.

A story of being seriously ill when much younger played an important part of Leah’s narrative about starting a family of her own to pass on the ‘gift’ of life. She felt that she had been ‘given a life’ by her parents and thought that the experience of having anaemia as a child had helped her to appreciate this gift and ‘respect life more than a lot of other people’. Reflecting on her love of her family and what they had been through together shaped her narrative about the future, providing her with an

ideal example of the type of family life she dreamt of having herself one day, wherein her children would have ‘a good education’ and a ‘happy family environment’. This imagined future was also important because it felt like something that was achievable when so much else seemed uncertain. She was worried about what lay ahead, and so imagining and planning her future family not only reduced her fears slightly but also gave her life meaning and purpose. It would not be until she had her own ‘future family’ that her personal goals about the continuation of life would be ‘completed’.

Whilst many talked about adulthood as a time of being free from restrictions, their narratives about the future also often included detailed plans of action to achieve both immediate and more long-term educational and relationship goals. For others, however, this was seen as restricting both the freedom and fun of adulthood. Beth thought a ‘good’ life was a ‘fun’ life. The narrative she constructed about the importance of having fun now and in the future often seemed to stem from nostalgic reminiscences about her childhood, in which she had ‘loads of free time’. She felt that she had to ‘do all the things I want to do while I can’, because she was ‘not going to be 15 forever’. But unlike many of her friends, she did not feel the need to make detailed plans for her future life: ‘I don’t plan stuff out cos I never know what’s going to happen, and I think it’s more exciting that way, not knowing’. By not planning her future, she thought that she would have more surprises which would be ‘more fun’. Through reflecting on enjoyable experiences of the past she constructed a narrative about the importance of leaving the future open to surprises.

Several participants recounted learning in their recent pasts about the stories of other people and used their retelling of these stories in the interview to not only convey ideas about what constitutes a good life but to construct narratives about the

importance of being able to look back at the end of life on ‘a life lived well’. Fantasy fiction and musical theatre played an important role in Zoe’s narrative of self-improvement. But as well as the escapism that these stories provided, she also felt she could learn valuable lessons about her own life from their characters’ fictional experiences:

If I think of Jean Valjean in ‘Les Mis’ [*Les Miserables*], he turned from, like, a convict to raising a child and being a mayor of a town, so it shows you can, like, turn your life around if it’s not good at the start ... you can, like, work on it and then build up a good life – it might take time – but it will be there.

It was important, for Zoe, to live her life without being limited by others and to take every opportunity to ‘build up a good life’, and Jean Valjean’s narrative arc illustrated what she described as ‘living life to the fullest’, which she thought was essential for a happy life. The biographies of famous people were also drawn on as inspiration for leading positive and successful lives in the future. Daniel, David, Leah, Rachel and William were all inspired by the example of Martin Luther King, partly because, as Rachel said, ‘he stood up for what he believed in and he died doing what he knew was right’. For Alice, the example of comedian and writer Stephen Fry, was inspiring because she thought he had been ‘candid’ about the difficulties in his past, which had served to ‘help other people’ – another important part of her narrative of becoming a ‘better person’ in life. And Zoe said she often thought about the story of Margaret Thatcher, which she felt taught her about perseverance and overcoming obstacles: ‘Just cos you’re a different sex, it’s like, if you want to be a builder, be a builder...’.

5.3 Narratives of Self-Improvement

For many of the participants, both the narratives that they constructed through sharing stories that lent cohesion to episodes in their pasts, and the narratives that they constructed through anticipating their own future lives in relation to the life stories of others, were narratives of self-improvement. When they talked about their futures and their pasts, they often did so in relation to an expectation that they should constantly strive to improve their lives. The importance of working hard at school in order to eventually achieve a successful career seemed to be a particularly prevalent form of this narrative. For some, it generated anxieties or meant that they were often aware of those moments in which the dominance of this narrative in their lives could be escaped. But most seemed accepting of this narrative, which appeared to have been adopted from significant people in their lives as well as the social context in which they lived. It often provided the primary motivation behind choices made in the present.

William had taken a photograph to represent ‘school work’ because he thought that this was essential for success later in life, and would eventually result in living ‘a good life’. Similarly, Ben believed that school was a time of preparation and, as the ‘next three-and-a-half years will affect the rest of my life’, it was important to ‘make the best out of what I’ve got’. Craig valued his time at school because it was a ‘key part of my future life’ and Nick tried ‘really hard’ with his schoolwork, so that it would ‘be easier further on’ and result in ‘a better quality of life’. Each of these participants also spoke of the inspirational examples of their parents, who all believed in the value of hard work in life, and this particular influence on their lives was something that many of them appeared happy to accept. For example, Laura’s family were ‘very keen on work and school and studying’ and

would continually encourage her to think about her future education and career. The expectation that she might go on to higher education was not something that she felt particularly anxious about, considering it to be ‘natural for me to want to achieve’, but she did sometimes feel pressure to succeed at playing the viola and was ‘a bit scared of performing’. However, her experience of being part of an orchestra was something that had enabled her to learn the value of ‘working as a team’, which she believed was a skill that would be useful for her future career, and this had helped her to overcome her fears.

This approach to both school and extra-curricular activities was something that was shared by a number of other participants. For example, Michael thought that school work was ‘probably the most important thing’ in his life and, although he enjoyed playing the saxophone and piano because he thought that ‘everyone needs free time’, his decision to learn musical instruments was partly motivated by his ambition to have a successful career in the future: ‘if you learn music, you’ll have better chances of getting a good job because it shows involvement and everything’. Michael also mentioned some of the sports that he was involved in at school, seeing these too as things that would help him to get a good job: ‘The rugby, I’ve always enjoyed that but it’s also sort of kept me going that I’ll sort of get a better job being in a rugby team and doing all that.’ But then, when he mentioned badminton, he said, ‘I don’t think you really get anything out of badminton, I’ve just really enjoyed it. It’s just I’m fairly good at it and, yeah, it’s just quite fun, yeah.’ The significance of a narrative about self-improvement in Michael’s self-interpretation therefore appeared especially telling when, describing his motivation for playing sport, he seemed genuinely surprised at his inability to think of any reason to play this particular sport apart from enjoyment.

But enjoyable activities also contributed to wider narratives of self-improvement and success in life. Alice thought ‘improving yourself’ and having ‘something to strive towards’ was important ‘because you only get one shot at life’. She especially enjoyed karate, because progress was recognised by being awarded different grades. Henry’s experiences during Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions were important because he had ‘learnt’ from having ‘experienced stuff’ that he ‘thought would be difficult’ and Ben found a similar sense of pride and achievement through climbing with the Scouts. But this activity was important not simply because it was a fun and exciting activity but because it also required careful, cautious and strategic thinking, which had influenced how he approached his school work and how he viewed life in general:

Climbing in general is like trying to reach for your goals, trying to reach for the next step or hole, or whatever. That’s what I want to do, not just rush straight ahead and go for the next thing, um, and don’t suddenly go, just make small steps and you’ll eventually get there, like in climbing.

For a number of the young people, then, although the hobbies and activities they enjoyed were fun, there was also a sense in which what was most important about them was what they contributed to narratives of self-improvement and development. This meant that they would often apply what they learnt about discipline, dedication and perseverance from their hobbies to the higher goal of succeeding academically, which would in turn lead to a rewarding career in the future. It also meant that participants would spend time planning how they would achieve future careers. As Rachel wanted her future to be as stable as possible, her career aspirations required careful consideration, including ‘backup plans’ that she could pursue if she did not become a ‘performer’. Zoe’s narrative about the future also included career plans,

but awareness that achieving her goal of a career in the theatre might not be possible meant that she too had 'backup plans' that reassured her. But, despite having alluded to gender discrimination when talking about Thatcher, 'the first woman President', Zoe also implied that success in life was unrelated to social or financial advantage or disadvantage, saying that everyone has 'the same amount of chance as everyone else'. Instead, success was about 'talent'.

For some of the young people, however, this narrative of self-improvement, stressing the importance of working hard in school, establishing good job prospects and achieving other (mostly financial) successes in life, appeared to make them more anxious about their present lives and was reflected in their descriptions of self-doubt and low self-esteem. For example, Jack was worried because he was 'not getting A*s and A's and stuff', which he thought might not be 'good enough to do the things I want to do'. This was important because he wanted to have 'enough money to be able to live on [his] own'. The pressure to do well, felt by Jack and driven by a narrative of academic self-improvement, was also experienced by Beth as a pressure to always use her time constructively in the achievement of this goal. Being free to enjoy her time and not feel that she had to follow a particular life plan was important for her, but much of her free time was already taken up with activities that were judged to be 'productive' in some way. For example, whilst drawing was 'the one thing' she felt she was 'good at', more importantly it was also a hobby that involved doing 'something productive' rather than 'just sitting around'. As much as she claimed to enjoy using her time constructively, however, Beth also admitted that she was 'probably happiest' when she was going home on the school bus because this was a time when she was unable to do anything especially productive and therefore did not feel guilty for 'wasting' it:

Like when I'm on the bus I can't *do*, there's nothing I *can* do, and I just like that feeling of 'I can have a break, I don't need to do anything'. But when I'm at home and I feel, like, I have this time now to do something and I just don't do it, and I'm just sitting there thinking what shall I do? I don't like that cos I feel, like, I need to do something [laughs].

The enjoyment Beth got from this escape – both from feeling the pressure to use all her time wisely and from the guilt she felt whenever she did not – seemed to be more significant for her than the importance she also sometimes placed on being productive. Her love of carefree time, day-dreaming and escapism was also reflected in her love of fantasy fiction and beliefs about 'ghosts, monsters and all that', which made 'life more interesting' and played an important role in her narrative about the importance of having 'fun'.

Participants shared stories about their past experiences as well as their anticipated futures, and these experiences often contributed to their narratives of overcoming obstacles, continual self-improvement and future success. In the following sections, these narratives are examined further through a consideration of theories within the humanities and social sciences that explore the relationship between time and narrative and how this shapes our self-interpretations.

5.4 Time and Narrative

In order to understand another person's life, it is necessary, philosopher Anthony Kerby argues, to understand 'their passage through time', which amounts to 'their autobiography or self-narrative' (1991:15). Participants' self-narratives are closely linked to their experiences of time. But, for psychologist Jerome Bruner, our 'sense of lived time' is not something that can be described in a neutral manner nor simply measured in a neutral manner, as if we were describing the passage of 'clock time'

(2004:692). Our self-interpretations necessarily involve descriptions of our pasts and perceptions of our presents and our anticipated futures that include events and actions that are significant for us.

A particularly influential contribution to understandings of the relationship between our experiences of time and of narrative, and of how they are brought together in our self-interpretations, comes from Ricoeur, who sought to demonstrate the ‘reciprocity between narrativity and temporality’ (1984:3). We cannot understand narrative without recognising how time is involved in narrative construction, and understanding time through narrative helps us to understand our own existence as temporal beings. In his analysis of the ‘correlation’ between time and narrative, Ricoeur draws on Augustine’s understanding of time and Aristotle’s definition of plot (1984:52). Augustine’s perception of sacred time differed from what philosopher Karl Simms describes as the ‘rationalist’ theory found in Aristotle’s *Physics*, in which time is perceived as ‘a series of points each of which passes away to give rise to a new point in a succession’ (2003:81). Instead, as Ricoeur summarises, Augustine sees our experience of time as ‘three aspects of the present – expectation, which he calls the present of the future, memory, which he calls the present of the past, and attention which is the present of the present’ (1991a:31). The past and the future are experienced through the movement of the mind, where thinking is understood as a form of what Martin Heidegger called ‘presencing’ (Simms 2003:82).

For Ricoeur, narrative has ‘the same threefold composition as time experienced by humans’ (Simms 2003:86). In order to understand both a fictional narrative and our self-narratives, it is necessary to follow a plot, but Ricoeur develops Aristotle’s definition of plot as ‘the *mimēsis* of an action’ into three different ‘senses of the term’ (1984:xi). Just as there are three aspects of the present,

narrative involves three aspects of mimesis – prefiguration (mimesis₁), configuration (mimesis₂) and refiguration (mimesis₃). But, despite numbering these three aspects, mimesis, like time, is not to be thought of as a linear process but as a three-fold movement of the mind. Just as ‘the present is an anticipation of the future mediated by the memory of the past’ rather than one point in a linear progression of points, in narrative, ‘prefiguring is configured into refiguring’ (Simms 2003:86). Prefiguration (mimesis₁) refers to the ‘pre-understandings of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character’ (1984:54). Meaningful structures consist of agents, goals, motives, expectations, and circumstances as well as answers to questions about “‘what”, “why”, “who”, “how”, “with whom”, or “against whom”” (1984:55); symbolic resources consist of the ‘signs, rules, and norms’ that allow ‘human action’ to ‘be narrated’ (1984:57); and the temporal elements are those moments or activities that individuals are preoccupied with or present in, allowing them to construct and reference time but also constituting Care (*Sorge*) (1984:61), a term Ricoeur borrows from Heidegger. Configuration (mimesis₂) involves ‘emplotment’, which brings pre-understandings together in a ‘synthesis of the heterogeneous’ (1984:66), a structuring of the disparate elements that form our pre-understandings of the world of action into a coherent whole or ‘text’. Reconfiguration (mimesis₃) occurs at the ‘intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader’ (1984:71). The narratives that are ‘emplotted’ or ‘configured’ (mimesis₂) from our ‘prefigured’ experience of the world (mimesis₁) are ‘refigured’ through our reading or interpretation of them (mimesis₃). Understanding this three-fold mimetic process helps explain ‘narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader’ (1991a:26). Our preconceptions come together with the events of any narrative and through this interaction there is

potential for a new and deeper understanding of the text, which can affect how the ‘hearer’ or ‘reader’ chooses to act in the world.

Narrative is especially suited to helping us describe how our pre-understandings of the past and of the future are ‘configured’ in the present. But this must consist of more than an ‘enumeration of events in serial order’ (1984:65) and, for Ricoeur, it is mimesis₂ that ‘draws a configuration out of a simple succession’ and ‘transforms the events or incidents into a story’. Emplotment brings together ostensibly separate events and actions into ‘an intelligent whole’ (1984:65), such that incidents in the past which may not have seemed to be particularly significant take on new significance. This might involve reframing certain past episodes or expectations of the future as essential for the meaning of our overall narrative. As Kerby writes: ‘Narration both excludes certain phenomena and dwells on others; it is unavoidably selective’ (1991:47). This selective configuring of our lived experiences means that the stories we tell are also always an interpretation (Bruner 2004). But, further, for Ricoeur, it means that ‘narrative, among other signs and symbols’ is ‘a privileged mediation’ for self-interpretation (1991b:188), and this is partly due to what he considers to be the ‘pre-narrative quality of human experience’, which means we can speak of life as ‘a story in its nascent state’ (1991a:29).

5.5 Life as a Narrative

The narratives that we create form a coherence and unity from the chaotic elements that make up our pre-understandings of life. Advocates of the thesis that we view our lives as stories, see constructing stories out of our experiences as helping to provide a form to our otherwise formless existence, giving shape to our lives and thereby imbuing them with meaning: ‘Emplotment endows the experience of time with meaning’ (Ezzy 1998:244). While literary scholar James Phelan does not view his

own life as a 'single coherent grand narrative', he nonetheless finds that the application of narrative to short episodes in his life means he is able to identify and provide coherence to 'more manageable clusters of events and their significances' (2005:209). Literary scholar James L. Battersby also views story-telling as a suitable medium for structuring shorter episodes of our lives: 'if an episode can be discriminated [in time], it can be presented in a narrative' (2006:31). The tendency to find form and structure in our lives is, Battersby suggests, seemingly natural for human beings:

We are form-finding creatures by native endowment, it seems. Making sense is what we are obliged to do, and making sense is a form-finding activity, and where there is form there is story potential (2006:38).

In telling me about their lives, all the participants found story-forms in their experiences of the past and in their anticipations of the future that enabled them to construct wider narratives that provided coherence, shape and meaning to their present self-interpretations. But only two of the participants viewed the whole of their lives in narrative form. Abigail and Stacey took the opportunity provided by the photography task and the interview to tell me about their lives understood as a narrative whole, both making use of the term 'life story' to frame their understandings of what it was they were telling me.

Abigail chose to take a photograph of a clock, which elicited the wish 'that the clock could go back' so she could return to a time before her family became 'a bit split up'. Some of the happiest 'moments' in her life had been those spent with her family during past Christmases, which she thought 'kind of make up your childhood'. But the photograph also prompted a reflection on her imagined future, and the ability to move between past and future was important for her understanding

of life as a story of journeying or questing. Lasting happiness was central to this narrative: 'at the end of the day, once you've made your life and you've settled it and you're happy with it, I think that's when you've completed your journey.' The story of her quest so far incorporated rituals and festivals that marked moments of growing up and other important stages on the journey. Other projected rites of passage included marriage, which she saw as a 'whole new beginning' in life, but she was disappointed that there were not many opportunities to enjoy these types of rites of passage as a young person. She thought that it would be nice if 'our country' had a similar celebration to the Jewish ritual of Bar Mitzvah because 'it's another step in growing up' that could mark a transitional period and important episode in the story of her life.

Abigail often reflected on how other people might interpret or read her 'life story' as a whole. She had taken a photograph of herself looking into a mirror to represent the importance of other people's impressions of what she was like 'as an actual person'. This was not because she was overly concerned about what others thought of her appearance, but rather that they might think of her 'as someone who is going to achieve something'. She was also interested in the lives of others, imagining that they too might have similar stories to tell:

I always think when we have assembly [at school], I look around and I think all of these people, they all have their own little story, and there's seven billion of us on the earth and everyone's got their own little story and it would be nice to learn about other people's stories.

But underlying this interest seemed to be a need for reassurance that her thoughts and experiences were similar to those of other people. 'I've got my own story to tell

about my life and I'm sure everyone else does', she said. 'I know what I'm doing and I wonder if it's similar to everyone else, the way people think.'

Abigail's interest in telling a life story, as well as her concern about other people might think of it, was shared by Stacey, whose desire for her life to be remembered as an example for others seemed to be reflected in the way she approached the photography task and interview. Significant people in her life included her adoptive parents, who helped her think about what was right and wrong by talking about the different paths it was possible to follow in life. Taking the 'right path' would mean 'going up' and 'achieving everything', and Stacey was determined to lead a good life and move in this direction. But she also wanted to pass her knowledge of right and wrong on to others, which was why she wanted her life to be a 'story' that could be used as an example for people to follow after she had died:

I want to do good things and then that person becomes like me, the child becomes like me, and it keeps going like that and people will be, like, 'oh, I remember'. Like, when I'm long gone and dead, that they'll remember me, like, cos I'm a good person.

Stacey often emphasised the importance of memories and the act of remembering. She had photographed framed pictures that reminded her of past episodes in her life, because she thought she was 'really bad at remembering'. It was important for her to be able to 'explain them' to others, including me, because they helped to 'represent' her 'past life', enabling her to 'tell sort of like a story' about happier times. It therefore sometimes seemed as if she understood the interview as an opportunity to document her story so far, which was perhaps why she concluded by saying, 'that's the end of my life story'.

A person's 'life story' need not be understood as referring to their life in its entirety. Rather, it could be used to explain how a person came to be at a particular point in time, referring to the 'internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future' (McAdams 1996:307). Such an understanding of the relationship between narrativity, selfhood and time is an example of what Strawson terms the 'psychological Narrativity thesis', which asserts that human beings 'experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort' (2004:428). This involves more than simply viewing oneself as a human being with a beginning, middle and end; rather, it requires 'some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally, form-finding tendency' (2004:441). However, this understanding of life as a narrative is not necessarily the only or most suitable way for humans to view their lives through time. While Ricoeur appears to assume that narrative is universally important for interpreting our lives, others have argued that it is something that might be best suited to his modern European and Christian perspective on life (Gallois 2007:44; Klepper 2013:15) or that the tendency to see one's life in a narrative form is more likely amongst individuals who have a particular personality type (Strawson 2004). As Battersby notes, 'Narrative is really but one way among many ways of talking about or construing relations between this and that' and 'each and every one' can be, he says, 'marvellously serviceable in the cause of self-representation' (2006:39). But it is important to note that, having been invited to explain what they considered to be important in their lives, story-telling was perhaps tacitly encouraged during the interviews with participants. As Battersby notes:

Ask me about me, my life, about what I'm doing, where I'm going, where I've been, what I've done, what it's like being me, and I'll tell you a story. And I'll do so because I had a beginning, and ever since I can remember I've been on a journey, moving relentlessly forward (2006:37).

And yet people vary in the extent to which they make use of form-finding and story-telling in their lives. Some people may not view their lives as a grand narrative, but still find that certain episodes from their past are made more coherent when structured as a story. But, to the extent that participants chose to adopt a narrational approach to their self-interpretations during their interviews, Ricoeur's work on how narrative construction relates to perceptions of time elucidates in more detail *how* participants' past experiences and anticipated futures can be 'alive' (Strawson 2004:432) in their present self-interpretations.

5.6 Configuring Matters of Importance

Constructing narratives about achieving and maintaining security and stability, overcoming obstacles, not repeating past mistakes and protecting others, and about gaining freedom and independence, starting a family, constructing a good life, and being open to surprises provided participants with a coherent structure to make sense of their past experiences and anticipated futures. According to Ricoeur, such a process is properly understood as the process of emplotment or configuration (*mimesis*₂). Participants are drawing together or configuring elements from within their pre-narrative or prefigured experience of life, their pre-understandings of the meaningful structures, symbolic resources and temporal character of the world of action (*mimesis*₁).²⁸

²⁸ On *mimesis*₃, see Conclusion.

For these young people, prefigured *meaningful structures* included agents, goals, motives, expectations and circumstances. While the participants themselves are agents within their own narratives, other agents included loving parents, close siblings, boy/girlfriends, supportive grandparents, estranged and absent birth parents, separated or divorced parents, adoptive parents and step-parents, unsupportive or ineffectual teachers, bullies, celebrities, historical figures and fictional characters. Participants' goals included working hard, passing exams, progressing with the activities and hobbies that they enjoyed in their free time, and gaining recognition for actions through achieving specific awards. Their motives ranged amongst fitting in, gaining respect, living life to the full, being true to themselves, being a good person, anger at injustice, protecting others, financial reward and disproving detractors. Personal expectations included having a good career, going to university, starting a family, affording a house, and enjoying free time. The circumstances in which participants found themselves encompassed loving families, trustworthy friendships, bullying, academic difficulties, family bereavements, disabilities and illnesses (their own and others'), divorce, adoption and difficult and abusive relationships. Each of the participants placed a slightly different emphasis on these elements. For some, the role of significant agents in their lives was the most important pre-narrative element in their narratives, whereas for others their present circumstances or the role of future goals and expectations featured more in the stories they told.

Temporal elements that participants attended to and preoccupied themselves with included family time, time with friends, time alone and time engaged in particular activities. For example, Daniel's family circumstances were quite difficult and this appeared to influence the narrative that he structured around the importance of enjoying each moment in his life. He photographed takeaway food to represent

time spent with his family, and a 'table curling set' that was important to him because he thought of it as a 'family game'. These things reminded him of the need to 'treasure the moments' he had with his family and 'to be with them as much and treasure what they do for you', ensuring that 'you don't waste any time' since such moments do not last forever. For other participants, family time tended to constitute family meals (William), family holidays (David), shared activities like shopping (Nick) or film nights (Beth), and one-to-one time with specific family members (Joanne, Karl, Stacey). Spending time with friends often involved sharing hobbies and activities (Craig, Jack, Michael, Nick), sharing secrets, hopes and fears (Ellie, Laura), and helping and supporting each other (Craig, Nick). While time alone was often found by participants in their own rooms (Joanne, Karl, Megan), others found it through going for walks (Beth), climbing trees (Martha) or daydreaming whilst ostensibly involved in other activities (Craig).

Sometimes participants were so engrossed in their hobbies and activities, they would generate feelings that were not directly related to the activity itself. For example, Leah described running as something that 'allows me to be free' and 'allows the freedom that I feel makes me happy' and Henry found that skiing was something that 'calms my mind', giving him a 'feeling of immense freedom' and of being 'really in control'. While most participants included family and friends as significant agents in their construction of narratives, for others it was the experience of *time* with these agents that was a pre-narrative element. In other words, they were moments in which participants experienced time *differently*. As Katie had until recently been an only child, the time she spent drawing was likened to time spent with a 'friend' because this pastime had 'been there for' her when she had been alone. For Jack, time spent with his new best friends Joe and Lizzie seemed to pass

differently from time spent by himself. Martha seemed to experience time differently when she watched Japanese Anime films: involvement the ‘very deep’ and ‘very sensitive’ storylines meant she could escape from reality and ‘sort of zone out’. This was important to her even though it would sometimes mean that she would forget to socialise with her family and then ‘get told off for being anti-social’. While all the participants spoke about the specific activities that they enjoyed spending their time on, some experienced the *time* engaged in them *differently*.

Theorists of narrative and self-identity argue that the stories we tell about our lives are also inherited from our traditions and cultures. Our self-interpretations therefore often reflect the values of the society within which we live, constituted by shared *symbolic resources* whose influence is often beyond our control. This is an argument made by sociologist Margaret Somers, who writes that ‘all of us come to be who we are (however, ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making’ (1994:606). We are embedded within narrative formations that are cultural and institutional, and these wider public narratives not only become part of the stories we tell, they are also where we turn in order to make sense of our lives. ‘While there are opportunities for identity to be a creative work of style’, sociologist Douglas Ezzy observes, ‘most people tend to adopt the culturally given plots ... the “basic values” or culturally embedded narrative forms on the construction of the self-story’ (1998:248). These plots and narrative forms are part of what Taylor calls our webs of interlocution. They constitute some of the pre-figured symbolic resources that we draw on to make sense of our lives, and they are configured into the stories we tell. But alongside wider narratives from society, our lives are often narrated by those within our more local defining communities. For example, our families have

narrated us from the moment we are born: as young children, we are told by others, ‘you’re Mummy’s brave little boy’ or ‘you’re Daddy’s little princess’. We are told if we are good or naughty. As we grow, we might be told, ‘you were always such a happy baby’ or ‘you always picked yourself up when you got hurt’. Key people in our lives say, ‘you’re really good at that’ or ‘you make me cross’. At school, our teachers might also narrate us, telling us ‘you’re a star’ or telling others that we ‘rarely play nicely’. As Kerby writes, ‘we have already been narrated from a third-person perspective prior to our even gaining the competence for self-narration’ and these external narrations ‘contribute to the material from which our own narratives are derived’ (1991:6). This process of being narrated by others therefore has a direct influence on the stories we ourselves tell – and tell ourselves.

It was clear that a narrative about self-improvement was a symbolic resource perceived by the young people within their wider social contexts, a prefiguration that gave meaning to their experiences and allowed them to configure their experiences both of the past and of their anticipated futures. This narrative stressed the importance of hard work at school and of achieving success later in life and generated expectations that affected the stories participants told. The identification of this symbolic resource reveals that participants’ interpretations of their own behaviours, as well as those of others, had been configured from ‘the specific demands that society places on young people to make decisions about the future’ (Steinberg 2011:14). But participants also identified specific agents – most frequently parents, peers and teachers – whose personal expectations reinforced this broader social narrative. Although Michael mentioned that his parents would ‘always nag me to do more work’, he seemed happy to share the assumption in his family that ‘it’s important to work and get a good job’. William thought that one of the

important roles of family was to 'help you get good grades'. Henry described his parents as 'really big supporters' who would take a keen interest in his academic progress at school and encourage him to work harder, or praise and 'congratulate' him when he was successful. And Laura described her father as 'keen that I do well in school and things', which was partly because 'he wants me to grow up and have a really good job and go to university and things'. Although Martha felt supported by her parents, she was also afraid of disappointing them, which 'literally destroys me', and so trying to make them proud of her was especially important.

Growing up in families where hard work, academic achievement and future career success were expected was quite common for these young people. They enjoyed being praised by their parents and rewarded for working hard, and they also seemed happy to accept a cultural narrative in which hard work at school would lead to university and eventually a successful career. Working hard and constantly finding ways to improve themselves were elements of a narrative that they had inherited from their parents, and this was often thought of as a natural way of leading their lives in the present and preparing for their imagined futures.

For many of the young people, it was important, therefore, to have already considered their future career goals and be working towards these by succeeding academically. This type of preparation for the future would seem to have become especially important for young people today living in what many scholars consider to be an increasingly complex and uncertain world. In such a world, sociologist Alan France writes, 'individuals (and especially the young) have to plan and navigate their own career and lifestyle directions' (2007:61). While the subjective turn in modern western societies may mean that many people feel freer to pursue their own goals in

life, the ‘individualism of self-fulfilment’ (Taylor 1992:14) means that more expectations are also placed on the individual to support themselves and to succeed:

Individualism is also seen as becoming institutionalised within our everyday lives, being driven by global forces of production and consumption. It is not just driven by neo-liberal politics of self-interest, neither is it about free will. Individualism is linked to the disembedding of tradition and structure and the emergence of the age of uncertainty. Tradition and old collective ways of managing these processes are now, in late modernity, not able to help us negotiate a way through and, therefore, individuals have to rely upon their own biographies and personal skills (France 2007:61).

Although some participants constructed narratives about simply enjoying their present lives and not considering their future responsibilities, for many young people, the narrative of self-improvement for their future lives was important and influential. It influenced their attitude to their school work and played an important role in their free time. It meant that they sometimes expressed regrets about their past, especially if they had not worked as hard as they could, and felt anxious that they might not now have enough time to succeed academically, which meant it was necessary to be productive and use their time as constructively as possible. It also meant, therefore, that they often took an instrumental approach to structuring their time, based on expectations about their future lives. Their enjoyment of their hobbies, as well as the interest they had in their subjects at school, was secondary to the value these had for their future career goals. For many, this was not something that appeared to be a cause for concern – looking forward to their adult working lives was part of their present enjoyment of life. For example, Nick was perfectly happy preparing for the future and thought he was simply ‘making the most’ out of his life, which was

important because failure to grasp ‘all the opportunities you have’ was tantamount to ‘wasting your life’.

Conclusion

The young people drew together events, individuals and ideas from their experiences of the past and their anticipated futures to construct narratives which helped them to make sense of their present lives. Sometimes the interviews were understood as opportunities to share their lives as wholes, and sometimes the stories they shared represented shorter episodes. As well as being limited by their own personal experiences from the past, participants’ thoughts about their futures also seemed to be shaped by stories that were beyond their control, particularly the narrative of self-improvement. The sense that anything that might not contribute to a successful, happy, and fulfilled future should be avoided is examined further in Chapter Six, where the limitations that they imagined following a religion might impose on their lives are considered as part of an exploration of the young people’s construction of this concept. Chapter Eight explores some of the stories about past experiences of religion that influenced participants’ decisions to tick ‘no religion’ on their questionnaires. But, as detailed in Chapter Seven, the participants’ narratives of self-improvement and building a good life, their stories of overcoming difficulties in the past and not repeating past mistakes, and their need for stable and secure futures also influenced the young people’s beliefs about the end of life, life after death, the supernatural and prayer.

Chapter Six: Religion as Belief

Introduction

Being free to be different and to be themselves was an important part of the participants' self-interpretations, but their enjoyment of this freedom was partly dependent on important connections and attachments with family and friends. Participants' lives were also shaped by their narratives about the past and their anticipated futures, and the narrative of self-improvement in particular was central to their self-interpretations. This chapter moves to their constructions of religion, which was most often thought to consist of private and individualised propositional beliefs of a metaphysical or ethical nature. For participants, such metaphysical beliefs lacked enough empirical evidence to convince participants of their veracity and religious ethics were thought to restrict one's experience of life. This chapter therefore also illustrates how participants' constructions of religion as belief were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance.

This chapter details participants' constructions of religion, focusing specifically on what they said about the *content* of belief. It begins by discussing what was often thought to be the inextricable link between belief and religion, before exploring in more detail their understandings of religion as metaphysical and ethical belief. This thematic analysis of the data is followed by a consideration of how these constructions of religion relate to western academic and popular interpretations of religion that have focused primarily on private, individualised propositional beliefs. This leads to a brief examination of how the concept of 'faith' has been theorised, examining how 'faith' and 'trust' were understood by participants. These sections also explore how the participants' understanding of religion as private, individualised beliefs of a metaphysical or ethical nature relates to the importance they placed on

being free to lead authentic meaningful lives. The primary purpose of this chapter is to present the participants' constructions of religion as belief in order to explore their relationships of difference to these constructions in Chapters Seven and Eight. By discussing what the participants thought about the content of belief, this chapter also illustrates some of the problems with emphasising the importance of this aspect of belief over how belief *functions* in people's lives, which is the focus of Chapter Nine.

For the young people who participated in this research, religion and belief were closely related, such that when asked open-ended questions about their beliefs participants most often responded by describing what they thought about God, life after death and the supernatural. But it was also common for them to express disbelief in these in order to explain why they rejected the beliefs that they considered to be definitive of religion. Chapter Seven and Eight examine these beliefs further, determining whether beliefs adapted from religions mean that participants are 'religious' or whether ticking the 'no religion' box means participants are expressing 'non-religious' identities. But the current chapter stresses that, while some of the young people recognised that belief need not refer solely to religion and expressed beliefs that did not relate to religion, belief and religion remained synonymous for most. The data presented in this chapter therefore comes primarily from the answers that participants gave to the questions, 'What do you believe in?' and, from the end of the interview, 'Can you tell me what "religion" means to you?' But participants also spoke about religion when asked, towards the end of the interview, why they ticked the 'no religion' box, as well as when we discussed 'rights and wrongs' earlier on. This not only suggests that participants linked belief with religion, but that religion remained relevant for discussions about moral issues.

6.1 Belief and Religion

In their responses to the question about what they believed, most participants equated belief with religion. Before responding, a number of the young people checked whether, in asking them about belief, I was asking them about religion (David, Ellie, Jack, Laura, Martha, Megan, Michael). This exchange with William was typical:

Simeon: ...what do you believe in?

William: As in religion or-?

Simeon: Anything at all, yeah.

William: Well, I'm not of a religion of any sort, but- Because I don't believe in God or anything like that.

This equation of religion with belief was also apparent in participants' responses to the question about what religion meant to them. Some participants talked about religion as 'a faith' (Leah); as 'a culture' and 'a way of life that people have decided to follow' (Daniel); or as 'a sort of code' to live by, providing 'fables and messages' to help you 'think about choices in your life' (Martha). A few mentioned some of the different religious practices and sacred buildings that they knew about, such as Buddhist meditation or Christian prayer (Leah), arranged marriages (Stacey), Islamic dress codes (Craig), or churches and mosques (David). But religion was primarily understood to be 'a matter of believing in one thing or another' (David). It was 'what someone believes' (Beth) or 'what people believe' (Joanne). Although it involved following the beliefs of 'some sort of leader' (Michael), it was personal in nature: 'just a matter of opinion' (Rachel) or 'personal beliefs' (William).

Whilst they said that they 'don't really have a religion as such' (Katie) or were 'not super religious' (Rachel), participants went on to tell me about a number of beliefs that they had adapted from religious traditions. For example, Katie and

Rachel told me that they believed in heaven. David likewise told me that, although he's 'not a Christian', he does believe in God, heaven and hell. Beth said, 'I believe that, um, there could be a God and any religion could be right and we'll never know because we don't have the power to know that', and Laura told me, 'I guess I sort of believe in God a bit'. Other beliefs that appeared to have been adapted from religious beliefs included notions akin to karma, whereby 'if someone does something bad for you, they're going to get something bad for themselves' (Zoe). But others felt that it was important to state clearly at this point in the interview their disbelief in the existence of God. In answering the question about belief, Michael said, 'Well, I don't believe in God, I'm an atheist, so yeah', and after a long pause Henry told me, 'I don't really believe in God or religion. I'd probably say I'm an atheist'. While Abigail did not identify as an atheist, her beliefs about the importance of believing in herself stemmed from her concerns about depending on a God of whose existence she could not be certain:

I think you should believe in yourself because it's the only certainty you've got, you know that you're here and you know what you think, but you're not a hundred per cent that there's a God out there, so you might be believing in something that's going to let you down. But if you're in control of yourself, if you believe in yourself, you're not going to let yourself down.

Having related their beliefs to religion – both positively and negatively, and in varying degrees, sometimes affirming religious beliefs, sometimes affirming non-religious beliefs – some of the participants then went on to tell me that they believed in concepts like 'fate', according to which 'everything happens for a reason' (Megan); principles such as 'you should treat people with respect' (Nick); and goals

like ‘being a good person’ (William). Daniel said, ‘I really just believe that if anyone’s in trouble or they need help, then you should try your best to do so’.

Only three participants did not answer the question about belief by first talking about religion: Alice discussed religion when she spoke about what she thought would happen to her after she died; after discussing his beliefs about human rights, Craig went on to discuss religion in the context of God, evil and suffering; and Leah discussed Christianity in relation to rights and wrongs. When asked what she believed in, Alice began by reflecting on the nature of belief rather than immediately telling me about the content of her beliefs or relating belief to religion. ‘I think everyone believes in everything’, she told me.

...you can’t prove, for example, that we are sat in this room around a table.

There’s nothing you can actually do to prove that, you’ve just, you just do strongly believe it. ...So I think I believe in what is happening because, to me, it is. But it might not be, it might be a dream or whatever, but you believe it is. And so I believe in what’s going on.

Having expressed scepticism about the possibility of certain knowledge, Alice then told me of her belief in the ‘goodness of people’. Also answering the belief question without first talking about religion, Craig stressed that he believed in equal rights and Leah said she believed in free speech and the ‘rights to be who you want to be’ and ‘believe what you want to believe’.

One participant, Joanne, told me that she did not believe in anything and, although she related belief to religion in her answer, she appeared to adopt an ambiguous stance towards both religious belief and disbelief. She was unsure what to believe about the ‘stories about Jesus’, finding them ‘confusing’ because ‘people have their different opinions’ and she did not know if they were ‘true or not’, and

stories about paranormal or supernatural occurrences similarly puzzled her because she was unable to personally verify whether they actually happened. She therefore expressed indifference towards such beliefs. For example, when asked to elaborate on what she believed in, she said:

Nothing really... I don't believe in things. Like, in my RE mock it was, like, 'What's your belief?', or 'Is God real?', or something ... If He was real, it wouldn't affect me, but if He wasn't real, it still wouldn't affect me. So then it wouldn't really make a difference ... 'Cos it's not going to affect me in any way.

Here, Joanne seems to be talking about the effect that the veracity of beliefs about the existence or non-existence of God have on those who hold such beliefs. Since she neither had a belief that God existed, nor a belief that God did not exist, it would not affect her were either of these beliefs to be verified or falsified. However, as she often seemed to be more frustrated with the ambiguity of such beliefs than to be lacking an interest in them, it is possible that the importance of certainty and truth in Joanne's life meant that maintaining an indifferent stance towards religious beliefs, or any beliefs about the world that could not be directly verified, was preferable to her feelings of uncertainty, doubt and confusion.

6.2 Religion as Metaphysical Belief

Understood by participants as primarily belief-centred, religion was most often perceived as metaphysical in nature. Most related belief to belief in the existence of God and some related religion to belief in God when they attempted to convey why they were not religious. Others linked religion to God when asked what 'religion' meant to them. For example, Abigail said, 'when someone says "religion" the first thing I think of is God'. However, she then added, 'but when you think a bit more

into it, it's about the different ways'. A recognition that not all religions conceive of 'God' in the same way, or that different religions approach the worship of such a divinity or divinities differently, occasioned deeper reflections on the kinds of definitions that would satisfactorily describe all world religions. For example, Nick said that religion was 'a belief in, not just like God, but all the kind of aspects that come with it, like all the stories and whatever'. The absence of theistic belief in some religious traditions meant that a few of the young people decided that this form of metaphysical belief could not be a criterion of religion, such that their definitions of religion then became broader in scope, whilst remaining closely tied to belief: religion was belief 'in all the spiritual stuff' (Zoe) or about 'believing that there's something bigger' (Laura). Ben also thought that the existence of non-theistic faiths challenged the assumption that religion was primarily concerned with beliefs about God, and this caused him significant difficulty in defining the term 'religion':

Religion I would say is believing in [pause] ... Believing in something, but not believing in something, if you know what I mean. So not, for example, I believe that, I don't know – this is so hard! [Laughs] It's believing in a [long pause] [laughs] believing in something that has a deity, but not all religions have a deity-

Religion was something that had distinctive and definite features, but it was difficult to express what these were other than to state that following a religion meant that 'you believe in something' (Katie). As Alice also said:

It's a group of people who have a belief in something. In something beyond the belief that this is happening, something more, like a deity. Buddhists obviously don't have a God, but whether they are a religion, I don't know whether they'd be classed as that. Well, I know they are, but for me, it's a

group of people who believe more than just what is happening, for whatever reason that may be behind that, or for whatever else it might be-

This meant that rather than limiting religion to belief in God, it had to be closer to a belief in the non-material or supernatural, which Alice described as ‘more than just what is happening’. While she, as someone who ticked ‘no religion’, believes in ‘what is happening’, a religious person believes in more than, or something beyond, what is happening. But even broader understandings of the metaphysical beliefs of religion such as this were still seen to entail the rejection of scientific beliefs, which were deemed by participants to be incompatible with religion. Following a religion would necessarily involve rejecting scientific beliefs about the Big Bang and evolution and accepting a literal interpretation of the creation narratives and miracle stories from the Bible or other religious texts.

Participants often displayed an expectation that science would one day answer philosophical and theological questions such as the existence of God. For example, Craig thought that ‘until science proves it, there’s no denying that there might be a God because there could be and no one knows’. Others, like Katie, thought that science had already resolved questions of God’s existence. She had decided that she did not believe in God because science offered a better explanation for life on earth. There was more evidence for evolution than divine design, and science and technology had achieved more than religion. Others felt that, although it was impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God, there was more proof for science than religion and that the former held more explanatory power than the latter. Alice thought that, ‘as we get more proof of science, we get less of God’. This led her to remark upon what theologians and scientists call ‘the God of the gaps’

(Coulson 1958; Dawkins 2006; McGrath & McGrath 2007), helping us to provide answers to mysteries that science will eventually solve:

I kind of find he's a gap-filler, and if we don't yet know, or we haven't yet discovered we'll use God, and I think that's why belief has somewhat declined because we're able to answer more and more of the questions without, er, with better understanding and not just saying, 'oh, well that's the way God made it to be'. And I find that the gaps that God's needed to fill are getting smaller and smaller, and whether in time there's going to be any room for him, and there's anything that we can't not explain.

Alice considered herself to be someone 'who looks at the evidence'. Through science at school, she began to 'question whether we're really created in seven days', 'as it said in the Bible', and she now believed that science was more persuasive than what she described as the 'Christian theory'.

This understanding of Christianity and other religions as theories in competition with scientific explanations of the world was a commonly held view amongst the participants. For example, Michael did not believe in a 'creator of everything' or 'the all-loving Supreme Being' that is 'portrayed in the Bible and the Qur'an' because he thought that there was a lack of 'evidence' for such a creator 'compared to, like, the Big Bang and evolution, and things like that.' While scientific theories were supported by evidence, religious people were satisfied with the explanation that 'God has done that'. Although such points were often voiced by participants, Michael also appeared to feel that religious truth claims actively threatened his own world view. Therefore they were not something that could be simply dismissed as scientifically improbable; more than this, they were 'attacks' on his beliefs. He said,

I guess it's like the miracle stories, like, the feeding of the five thousand, the virgin birth- It's just what I believe in life, it sort of attacks everything that I believe in and just sort of says, "that's wrong, this is what happened."

Despite feeling that scientific theories 'sort of just disprove God', Michael nonetheless thought that there had not been any 'ground breaking evidence that shows that God clearly doesn't exist'. This meant that until God 'shows himself', Michael would not know 'for sure'. If at some point in the future he decided to 'become religious', he thought there would have to be a 'reason' for this. But, as he was uncertain about how God might reveal himself or what sort of proof might persuade him of his existence, he was unclear what sort of evidence or rational argument would lead him to change his mind in the future. Nick thought that, while God might have 'shown himself' to 'individual people', this might also 'just be within their own brains', so he, too, felt that there would need to be more 'religious evidence' to convince him. As Nick touched the table in front of him, he told me that he only believed in 'what's kind of here', which meant 'everything that's in front of us'. He thought that there was no reason to believe in anything that he could not experience through his senses: 'I don't think there's any point believing in supernatural beliefs if you've just got belief in it, I think you've got to actually have seen something to believe in it, really.'

Participants also linked religion to belief in literal interpretations of religious texts like the Bible. Following a religion necessarily involved believing that the narrational traditions of the world religions were 'true'. Biblical stories were interpreted literally and were therefore deemed scientifically impossible or, at least, implausible. Biblical stories often created confusion and doubt for participants, engendering more ambiguous feelings about their veracity. Ellie thought that it

would be nice to believe them, but often felt that they were simply too fanciful to accept:

If they were stories that could theoretically happen then I'd probably believe in it, but Jesus can't rise from the dead, Moses can't part the sea, and Jesus can't turn water into wine. It's not possible so why should I believe in it.

Ellie thought that she differed from the Christians in her family, as well as followers of other religious traditions, because she did not 'see things, like, in a story', such as the 'whole story thing of like Adam and Eve'. At one point in the interview, she said, 'I know they're like stories and they're not real', suggesting that there might be alternative ways of interpreting stories from the Bible and other religious texts. But much of her rejection of religion was based on a literal understanding of these stories. Following a religion was about belief in miraculous occurrences, and if these did not seem credible enough to believe literally then she did not think there was 'any point in dedicating yourself to something that you don't believe in'. There was a sense in which she was confused by religious stories and, although a part of her wanted to believe them, it was more important to be realistic. Rejecting what was thought to be 'impossible' was a recurring theme of Ellie's interview. Her rejection of religious stories as tall tales therefore seemed to be about maintaining a realistic outlook on life in order to prevent possible disappointment.

In order to follow a religion, Leah thought that it was necessary to believe and accept everything within that religion. She said, 'to be a Christian, I feel that I have to believe in everything in the Bible, but I don't.' While she thought she believed in 'some of the things' she did not believe in 'most of the things'. The miracle stories 'confused' her in particular, but she said that it would only be through acceptance of everything that doubts and questions could be resolved: 'if I had a

religion then I wouldn't need to question it because it would already be answered cos I'd already believe in it.' As we shall see shortly, Rachel also felt that if she had any doubts about religious beliefs it would not be possible to identify with that religion.

6.3 Religion as Ethical Belief

Participants most often understood religion as metaphysical belief, but they also saw religious belief as ethical in nature. This meant that some participants differentiated between the metaphysical and ethical dimensions of religious belief in order to talk about the religious ethical beliefs that they could admire and draw on as one moral resource among many whilst at the same time rejecting metaphysical belief in God. Michael, for example, expressed doubts about religious beliefs and put his trust in scientific theories for which there was empirical evidence, but he drew a distinction between beliefs about God or miracles and other elements of religion. He could therefore appreciate Christian morality and adhere to what he understood as religious ethical beliefs:

Although I don't believe in their idea of God, I believe in their morals – as in you shouldn't kill or you shouldn't murder or you shouldn't steal and things like that. So, you know, they've got their morals and things right. ... I'd be fine being a Christian apart from the worshipping God part, yeah, which I can't sort of believe.

This seems to suggest that he thought that commandments not to kill or steal were valuable prohibitions for any society, and that Christianity had its morals 'right' because they cohered with those he and others already believed in. Nonetheless, he also recognised that much of his own morality had been influenced by religion. However, these positive religious ethics were separated from religion, with the latter still understood primarily as consisting of metaphysical beliefs that he did not share.

Craig also spoke positively about religion, partly because he focused more on what he understood as the values and ethics from each religion rather than their metaphysical beliefs:

I'm not really a non-religious person; I'm more of a person who likes to follow different things from different religions and different parts of different religions ... because it's not really the religion that I like, it's like, I don't believe in the religion but I like to look at different parts of religion and see if they link in with the way I live.

Rather than wishing to follow a single religion, which might involve having to change how he lived his life, Craig was happy to make use of parts that he already agreed with and to reject those he did not. This meant that all religions had the potential to be sources of value that he could draw on if necessary.

Although it was possible to accept the positive content of many religious ethical beliefs, some of the young people questioned what motivated religious people to act on them. Although Alice seemed to appreciate and adopt the morality of her Christian parents, she rejected what she understood as the motivation behind Christian ethical behaviour and thought that observance of the ethical rules and regulations of religion was unnecessary for leading a good life: 'we're good because we are, not because we're trying to gain something from it, not because we're afraid of hell or whatever else the punishment might be, or because we want to go heaven.' She believed that religion encourages certain beliefs and behaviours based on a system of punishment and 'reward'. In contrast, she said, 'I want to think that we're good because intrinsically we are, not for a gain or to protect yourself from a loss'. As well as rejecting what she understood as the motivation behind religious ethical systems, Alice was also exasperated by what she saw as the lack of direct action

from those Christians who would ask God for help with the problems of the world rather than try to solve them alone:

I think that surely if we spent that minute-long of a prayer, going, ‘Well, what could I do to change the world?’ as opposed to asking, ‘What could we ask God to do?’ – because if he doesn’t exist, then nothing is going to happen – so surely we should just go, ‘Right, this is what’s happening, what could I do?’

As she was committed to helping others and changing the world for the better, Alice had become frustrated by what she considered to be the passivity of prayer.

However, while quiet prayer and devotion were of little relevance to most of the participants, such religious practices based on an individual’s private beliefs about God were preferable to what were considered to be the more dangerous elements of public religiosity. Devotion to religion and strength of belief were thought to be potentially harmful to society. Jack expressed concerns about the relationships between religion and violence and conflict. He thought that people who followed religions did not accept difference and therefore were at odds with his more tolerant view of the world. Sometimes people used religion as a ‘weapon’ and a ‘shield’, which meant that they ‘hate other people because of their religion’ and use their own faith to ‘defend themselves from people of other religions’. He thought that where there are ‘two religions that fight all the time’, if ‘you took religion away’ there would be ‘nothing to fight about’. Martha had a similar view about the relationship between religion and violence, saying, ‘there is such a thing as taking religion too seriously’. She felt that it was the failure of some religious people to recognise that belief should be held lightly which led to acts of terrorism. She was, therefore, openly critical of religion in this regard and of Islam in particular – a view

that seemed to have been largely influenced by her parents' understandings of this religion:

My mum watched the incident of 9/11 and also the London bombings, and there's a mental block [there's a refusal to engage with Islam], so I have to help my sister with her homework. Cos we're very accepting of religions, but we won't do the Islamic homework for RE, which is probably not necessarily good, but we just don't think that it was right at all, what they did.

Although Martha recognised that 'somewhere in [Islam] it's a crime to do what they did', she still felt that it was right to follow her parents' rule not to complete any RE homework on Islam, especially as she thought it was designed 'to make us more accepting of the religion'. She accepted that terrorist atrocities had only been carried out by a 'small group' of Muslims, but said that because they were responsible for 'several extremely evil things' it was better not to study this particular faith. Although she said she was 'very interested in religion' and thought it was 'fascinating', it seemed that this was only acceptable if religion remained a private belief the ethical dimension of which did not negatively impact other people's lives.

Many of the participants rejected religious ethical beliefs because they were perceived as being too restrictive. For Stacey, for example, following a religion meant that 'you're set on one religion and you don't change it for the whole of your life'. As well as not being free to leave, she also thought in some religions, such as Islam, 'your parents would have to pick who you marry', which she thought was 'a bit unfair'. Participants also thought that one of the limitations of religions was that followers were expected to accept every detail of their moral codes and there was no possibility for doubts or divergent ethical beliefs to be expressed. As Rachel told me:

In Christianity you're supposed to believe in every single thing and that goes for every single religion, but I believe that you can believe what you want to, and you can't just go with the rules that you've been set and sometimes it's okay to break rules and to believe what's important to you. ... I believe that you should always have a choice and it shouldn't be something that should be forced upon you. And you have to have your own rights to think about what you want, not what other people want you to have or want you to do.

Freedom was important, and following a religion should be a matter of choice rather than coercion. Rachel's father had wanted her 'to have the choice to be christened', and she had decided that she 'didn't want to be religious'. She was happier to 'believe in my own things':

I'm not religious and I believe what I want to believe in. And things that I've been taught I can take into consideration, but I don't have to believe everything that's been said to me, but I believe what I think is true.

Believing what she thought was 'true' was important for Rachel, but what mattered more was that she had the freedom to decide truth for herself: 'it's a matter of thinking what you want for yourself and not what everyone else wants you to think'. This independence of belief was something that was not always possible within a religion, and so it was better 'not to have a full belief in something', by which she meant that it was important not to let religion and belief dominate her life or 'overpower everything that I do'.

It was the impact that following a religion might have on one's freedom to choose how to live and act that was most often expressed by other participants as well. Henry's main objection to following a religion was that it would entail being limited by various rules and commandments. He thought that 'life was about choice'

but that religious adherents had limited choices in life and were unable to fully ‘experience stuff’ that they might learn from. He believed that the biblical story of Adam and Eve demonstrated how God prevented people from being free to choose how to live their lives, because ‘if you give someone choice and then you get angry and dictate what they do, you have taken all that choice away’. It was because of the limitations that religion placed on freedom of choice that Henry described religious people such as ‘monks and priests’ as ‘hiding away in monasteries, not going out and experiencing things’, which he thought would make you ‘quite an insecure person’. Religion could therefore make followers ‘feel quite scared by other people’. Following one particular religion might mean you would feel threatened ‘by other people who don’t share the same values’. In order to fully experience life and enjoy interacting with people from all faiths and none, Henry thought it was better to adopt what he understood as the neutral position of atheism: ‘if you don’t have a belief, you can easily accept others’ beliefs because it doesn’t change yours’.

A similar objection to religious ethics was voiced by Abigail. When she thought about religion, the first thing she thought of was God, but this was soon followed by the restrictive rules she associated with Christianity and Islam. The limitation that following such rules would place on her freedom was part of the reason she ticked the ‘no religion’ box:

I think that’s why I couldn’t be religious because of all the rules and everything. Yeah, you can believe in God but you don’t have to like [pause] ‘no sex before marriage.’ If you do have sex before marriage, does that make you not a Christian?

At this point in her interview, by separating metaphysical beliefs from what were understood as religious ethical beliefs about certain prohibitive acts, Abigail appears

to mirror Michael's relationship to their constructions of religion as belief. Whereas he felt comfortable accepting the Christian ethical beliefs whilst not believing in God, Abigail thought that having a belief in God was not as problematic as following what she saw as the restrictive ethical guidelines of Christianity.

6.4 Religion as Propositional Belief

Participants' understandings of religion as belief have been partly shaped by widely-accepted constructions of religion as a distinctive set of propositional beliefs. Jordan, one of Day's participants, described a Christian as 'someone who believes in God and Jesus and Bible and stuff', which as Day notes, simply reflected 'how the term "belief" has become associated with "Christian" over the centuries' (2009b:266-7). Similar understandings of Christianity, and the relationship between religion and belief, were articulated by my participants. In their constructions of religion as individualised beliefs about God that could not be supported by empirical evidence, participants' understanding of religion would seem to have been influenced by what Guignon describes as 'the modern worldview' (2004:26). The conception of religion as private belief is not, as anthropologist Talal Asad notes, one that has been accepted in all places at all times; rather, it has its own particular history, emerging from the social transformations that occurred in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. At this time 'religion' gradually moved from the public to the private sphere, and soon came to be understood primarily as a matter of individual belief: 'Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space, letting "belief", "conscience", and "sensibility" take its place' (1993:39). For Asad, this understanding of religion is also closely related to the history of the modern, secularised state. It was, he argues, not until after the 'Wars of Religion' in the seventeenth century, that definitions of religion 'stressed the

propositional – as opposed to political or institutional – character of religion’ (1993:41). But, as Smith notes, by the mid-eighteenth century, the notion that ‘a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or are not true’ had ‘sunk deep into the European consciousness’ (1991:40). This understanding of religion remains influential. As religion scholar David Morgan has observed, the academic study of religion in the West continues to be ‘shaped by the idea that a religion is what someone believes’ and that this amounts to a ‘discrete, subjective experience of assent to propositions concerning the origin of the cosmos, the nature of humanity, the existence of deities, or the purpose of life’ (2010:1).

Participants also understood religion to be concerned with propositional belief. As such, religious truth claims were understood as explanatory and similar to scientific hypotheses that could be proved with empirical evidence. As Guignon argues, the rise of science led to the disenchantment of the world, such that there are ‘no mysterious or supernatural principles at work’ (2004:31). The ‘immanence of God in the everyday workings of the world’ has been ‘replaced by scientific explanations’ (Fitzgerald 2007b:54). This can also be seen to have influenced the participants’ perceptions of what it means to be ‘religious’. As many of them thought that science provided explanations of the world, religion no longer served this purpose and was reduced to what some individuals choose to privately believe.

Although fourth century creeds of the early Christian church and the Islamic *shahada*, or ‘testimony’ of faith indicate that propositional beliefs have had a long history and played a central role in some religious traditions, this is not true of all other faiths. It is also important to note that there is more to Christian or Islamic belief than the assent to propositions. But understanding religious belief as primarily

propositional and explanatory in nature has been influential not only for western constructions of religion, but also for constructions of the concept of belief itself. As Fitzgerald notes, although ‘belief’ is a ‘multivalent word’, it has become ‘over determined by Protestant enlightenment intellectualism’, and is now widely understood ‘as a kind of imperfect propositional knowledge’ (2007a:13). This understanding of religion and beliefs has been challenged by anthropologists and theorists of religion studying the history of belief (Needham 1972; Ruel 1982; Smith 1991; Asad 1993), as well as by those focusing on how characterisations of religion as belief often fail to reflect how either religion or belief function in the lives of many people today (Lindquist & Coleman 2008; Morgan 2010; Day 2011; Day & Lynch 2013; Vasquez 2011; Harvey 2013). But constructions of religion as propositional belief, along with assumptions that this is the most significant type of belief in people’s lives, continue to influence not only academic studies of religion but also popular conceptions of religion and belief.

Understanding religion in this way is often attributed to the influence of Christianity on western scholars studying non-Christian religions and cultures, and, as Smith has observed, it has resulted in significant misrepresentation of other religious traditions (1991:180). But assuming the importance of this type of belief for western Christians might also be misleading. Religion scholars Thomas Tweed (2006) and Manuel A. Vasquez (2011) have both sought to emphasise the material, relational and experiential dimensions of religions, including those within western Christianity. And as religion scholar Graham Harvey has argued, it is important in the study of Christianity to differentiate between ‘lived Christianity’ and what he terms the ‘elite imaginary version’ (2013:192). By failing to recognise the diversity within Christianity, scholars have helped reify a particular understanding of this

tradition, and, for many people living in societies that have been shaped by Christianity, this has influenced perceptions of religion more generally. And the influence of this construction of religion was clearly evident in what the participants told me during their interviews.

6.5 Belief, Faith and Trust

For participants in this research, religion was most often understood as belief, which was in turn thought to consist of propositional statements. But a few participants also used the language of faith when talking about religion.

As part of their criticism of studies of non-Christian religious traditions that privilege the concept of belief, Smith (1991;1998) and the anthropologist Malcolm Ruel (1982) have both sought to demonstrate the value of studying the etymology of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ when seeking to understand the nature of religion more generally. In his commentary on the Hebrew Bible, the biblical scholar Daniel Schowalter notes that the forms of the noun *’emuna* or the verb *’mn* are usually translated as ‘faith’ or ‘having faith/believing’ and that this can be expressed towards God or to another human being. In addition, the Hebrew Bible makes use of the verb *bth*, which conveys ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’ rather than ‘to have faith’ (Schowalter 1993:222). This understanding of faith as ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’ differs from how faith is understood by New Testament writers such as Paul, where the Greek term *pistis* takes on a new meaning that is closer to what might now be thought of as ‘conviction’ or belief. The older renderings of the Hebrew *’mn* and the Greek *pisteuo* as ‘to trust’ or ‘to have faith/believe in’ differ from the notion of belief as acceptance of propositions, or what is sometimes described as ‘belief that’. This distinction has also been noted by philosophers of religion, who see value in how the term ‘faith’ signals the ‘fiduciary element, trust’ (Helm 2000:4). Alongside belief in

the intentional object of the ‘broadly cognitive component’ of religion, there is an affective state or feeling of confidence or trust. As Richard Swinburne writes, ‘the person of faith does not merely believe that there is a God (and believe certain propositions about him) – he trusts him and commits himself to him’ (2005:142). But there is also what John Bishop calls the ‘volitional’ dimension to faith, which is the decision to commit to some action or activity (2010:n.p.). Faith involves a practical commitment to trust or trust in God, and this affective dimension or ‘belief in’ element of faith is a significant complement to the cognitive or ‘belief that’ dimension.

Although it was not used to describe their own or others’ relationships with God or religion, some participants did use the language of trust, as already noted. They talked about important relationships of trust, formed with family and friends (Ellie, Joanne, Ben, William), with pets who were trusting and could be trusted not to act from ulterior motives (Alice) and with social workers who could be trusted to understand problems and the keep confidentiality (Rachel). Ben stressed the importance of engaging in activities that developed trust with others and, when asked about the supernatural, said that he would only believe the personal experience or testimony of someone who is trustworthy: ‘It would have to be someone I trusted, who wouldn’t lie to me’. But Henry used the language of both faith and trust when telling me about the teachers that he felt he *couldn’t* trust, saying, ‘there’s no point in trusting them or putting faith in them’ because they had not helped him when he was being bullied.

Other participants used the language of faith in relation to religion. Nick recounted that his religious friends often say that ‘one must have faith’. But, to him, faith was ‘like believing in something which you don’t know’. Here, Nick opposed

faith and knowledge, equating the former with an uncertain belief that falls short of the certainty of the latter. For him, faith remained belief *that* rather than belief *in*. Others talked about the faith that religious people put *in* God. Laura told me how she thought that the faith that her Mum put in God to help her through difficult times in her life was ‘comforting’:

I don’t have any things that I think God has helped me through, um, but I know people who have, so it makes me think that if they believe God’s helped them through things, that He could help me through some things, if I encountered difficulty in my life, so I think having that faith, it’s comforting.

But Alice found it ‘scary’ that Christians ‘put all their faith into’ God when they also admit that it is not possible to fully comprehend him. ‘Well, you don’t understand’, she said, ‘you don’t know what he’s like, you could be completely wrong and you just blindly believe in him’.

While some participants used the term ‘faith’ as a way of talking about religious people’s belief in God, ‘belief’ remained primarily understood as ‘belief that’ statements which were to be either accepted or rejected on the basis of their truth or falsity. However, this was not always the case. A few of the participants talked about religious belief in ways that suggested it might be possible to conceive of belief in broader terms than an affirmation or denial of propositional statements. Although some of these young people expressed degrees of both belief and disbelief in those metaphysical or ethical beliefs with which they associated religion, they sometimes appeared to adopt a more ambiguous stance towards these religious beliefs, expressing attitudes towards religion that seemed to fall between the dichotomy of belief and disbelief. This tendency points to the ways in which what some of the participants said in the interviews addressed not only the *content* but the

function of belief, particularly during moments when they reflected not only on the role religious beliefs play in the lives of people who belong to religious traditions but also on the nature of belief itself and its place in their own lives as young people of no religion. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine.

Conclusion

The majority of these young nones reflected a common understanding of religion as primarily concerned with propositional, individualised belief of a metaphysical or ethical nature. The subjective ‘turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences’ (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:2) means that enjoying the freedom to think for ourselves and to live our lives without the need for guidance from external sources of authority has become particularly important. For participants, a vital part of leading authentic and meaningful lives involved forming and maintaining close relationships with family and friends. But it was also important to be free to make their own decisions, to discover and learn about the world and experience as much as possible, and to rely on their consciences to guide them through life. This often meant that religion was not only dismissed because it was thought to limit this freedom; it was also considered to be redundant. As it was possible to lead authentic and meaningful lives in which they depended on themselves and their families and friends, a construction of religion that was primarily concerned with beliefs about the existence of God, or that limited their freedom to decide for themselves how they wanted to live their lives, was of little significance to them.

However, the majority continued to find value in certain concepts, beliefs, or practices that they adapted from different religious traditions, and the next chapter explores what this means for our understanding of young people of no religion as

well as for the concept of 'non-religion'. This chapter's thematic analysis of participants' constructions of religion as belief is therefore fundamental to an examination of participants' relationships of difference to religion (Chapter Seven) and to an exploration of their reasons for choosing to report no religion (Chapter Eight). Taken together, Chapters Six, Seven and Eight pave the way for a fuller discussion of the function of belief in participants' lives (Chapter Nine) and of how RE might better engage young people who have been influenced by an understanding of religion that is primarily concerned with the content of propositional beliefs (Conclusion).

Chapter Seven: Relationships of Difference

Introduction

By ticking the ‘no religion’ box, all of the young people who participated in this research chose to indicate their difference from the religions listed on the questionnaire. Lee defines non-religion as ‘anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion’ (2012a:131). Exploring the concept of ‘non-religion’ in the context of this study of young people of no religion involves a ‘bottom-up’ approach (Quack 2014:463) in order to determine what ‘religion’ means to participants and to understand how and why they differentiate themselves from such constructions. Many participants said that religion was primarily concerned with believing in a creator God and accepting literal accounts of miraculous events described in the Bible and other religious texts as true. In order to be religious, one had to accept such beliefs even though there was not enough evidence to support them. Religious people were also thought to be bound by ethical beliefs that restricted their ability to fully experience life. As participants rejected these beliefs, they chose to report no religion in ‘contradistinction’ to their constructions of religion (Lee 2014:479). But the majority of the young people also believed in some form of afterlife and some also described experiences of praying to God or deceased relatives. Participants sought to differentiate themselves from their constructions of religion but also held a variety of beliefs associated with life, the end of life, life after death, the supernatural and prayer. This chapter treats these beliefs as case studies that illustrate how broadening the scope of enquiry to include matters of importance enables us to understand how beliefs adapted from religious traditions function in participants’ lives, instead of focusing on the incoherent content of these beliefs or the inconsistent way in which they are held.

Participants placed significance on living authentically and being free to experience life, as well as on the need for stability and security, which then enabled them to express how they were different and unique. They also constructed narratives from, for example, stories about positive past experiences, not repeating mistakes, and building a good life in the future. In particular, the narrative of self-improvement helped them to make sense of their past experiences and their anticipated futures as well as their present lives. This chapter begins with thematic analysis of the interview data, illustrating how what they considered important in life was reflected in their beliefs about God, life after death, the supernatural and prayer. It details some of the participants' beliefs about these phenomena, as well some of the beliefs about life and its end held by young people who rejected belief in God, the afterlife and all forms of supernaturalism. This is followed by an examination of how similar beliefs held by people living in modern western societies have been interpreted by some scholars of religion. These scholars suggest that such beliefs are incoherent, inconsistent and lack salience for the individuals who hold them. However, as is demonstrated in the sections that follow and expanded upon in Chapter Nine, these interpretations of the data seem to be more concerned with the content of such beliefs rather than how they function in people's lives. This chapter therefore forms a much closer analysis and interpretation of how both belief and disbelief in God, the afterlife, and the supernatural functioned in the lives of the young people who participated in this research.

The question of how these beliefs relate to the concept of 'non-religion' involves examining why these beliefs were understood by participants to be *different* from those beliefs considered to be definitive of their constructions of religion and identifying the nature of this relationship of difference. This chapter therefore also

constitutes an examination of *the variety of relationships to religion* that can be discerned in participants' self-interpretations, while Chapter Eight explores in more detail the question of whether, in ticking the 'no religion' box, these young people were reporting a *non-religious* identity.

7.1 Life after Death, the Supernatural and Prayer

Many participants were uncertain of what might happen to them after they died, but thought that Hindu and Christian concepts such as reincarnation or heaven provided plausible explanations or 'theories' of what might happen. For example, Karl told me, 'I kind of believe in karma', by which he meant that 'if you've had a good life, you can, like, be reborn as like someone with a higher position in life'. For Stacey, believing in this kind of an afterlife was important for her sense of justice. If someone committed a crime, she thought that they would 'become a bug' in their next life, whereas those who behaved well would 'become as a human', which is what she thought might happen to her when she was 'reborn'. Zoe said she had 'learnt a lot about Hinduism' from RE lessons, and she had adapted the concept of karma from her studies to help explain what she saw happening around her: whenever someone did 'something bad', she would think 'Oh, you're going to get karma'. Zoe drew a distinction between her beliefs in karma and anything 'spiritual' or 'religious', viewing the principle of 'if someone does something bad for you [then] they're going to get something bad for themselves' as helpful for interpreting things as they happened to her or things that she did. When she behaved well or helped others, she thought that she might 'get good karma'. But participants viewed 'bad karma' as something that mainly applied to other people, since they 'had an alright life' (Karl) in which they did not do many 'bad things' (Zoe). This meant that

Karl thought that if he were to ‘die tomorrow’, he would ‘come back as another human, probably, just like a normal guy’.

William’s beliefs about life after death were also partly influenced by what he had learnt about karma and reincarnation in RE, but from his own personal study of religion he had concluded that ‘rebirth is the thing that I will believe in’. He thought he would have many different lives but that ‘you don’t remember lives before’. And yet he nonetheless felt that he would be able to remember the life he was ‘living now’ when he died and began his next life – the apparent inconsistency of which I return to below. For the other participants, lives in their continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth were more clearly connected through personal memory, such that reincarnation offered the hope that the lives they were enjoying now would not come to an end but rather continue in another form. No participant recounted memories of a past life, but they said that they ‘would’ be able to remember all their past lives, although it was not clear whether this was a future possibility in this life, in another or at some more distant point when their chain of lives came to an end.

Some participants found beliefs about the afterlife adapted from Christianity helpful for understanding what might happen to them after they died. However, this also appeared to confuse some of them. For Laura, believing in heaven meant that ‘by logic that makes me believe in hell as well’. But as she did not ‘really like the thought of hell’ and ‘wouldn’t really want anyone to go to hell’, she said, ‘I do believe in heaven and hell, but not strongly’. David believed in heaven, hell and a version of purgatory, but his personal interpretation of these concepts meant that he was not overly concerned about what would happen to him after he died. He was comforted by the notion of an afterlife that meant ‘there is someone who’s there in heaven’ who was ‘ready to accept you if you do die’. He also believed there was a

‘bit in the middle’ between heaven and hell, a place which he thought he might experience himself because this was ‘where you go if you’ve done some right and some wrong’. What appeared to reassure him about this interpretation of purgatory was that it seemed to be reimagined as a continuation of the life enjoyed in the present. This was why the concept of reincarnation also appealed to him. Like Stacey and Zoe, who were also attracted to both Hindu and Christian understandings of life after death, David was unsure about which of these two outcomes might be most likely to happen. He said that, as he had ‘done bad’ but ‘done good as well’, he thought that this ‘even balance’ meant that he did not need to be too concerned about precisely what might happen after death. He might spend some time in his version of purgatory, or be reincarnated as a human being, but in either case the possibility of continuing to live a life similar to the one he lived now was something that comforted him.

An important influence on Megan’s life was her fear of being left alone, isolated from her family and friends. This meant that, ultimately, she feared dying and the death of the people she loved. She surrounded herself with family and friends most of the time because ‘you always need people around you’, especially as ‘people are always dying’. However, unlike some of the other participants, her fear of dying was not mitigated by a belief in some form of afterlife. Rather, she consoled herself with the thought that when one person dies, another person might ‘come into the world’. She told me, ‘I don’t want to die; I want to live. I like my life; I don’t want it to end’. However, it seemed that the only hope she had about the end of life was the belief that whenever someone was seriously ill or died, another person might be born to compensate for this loss. This, she thought, had been the experience of her family:

Yeah, well, every time one of my family has got ill, I've had a cousin come into the world. So my nan had a lung tumour, Suzie came along; my granddad had a heart attack, little Callum came along; and when my cousin had a brain tumour, little Jack came into the world. ... I do think that when someone goes out, someone comes in.

As Megan thought of herself as 'a bit of a scientific person', she believed that it was 'your genes' and 'all your characteristics' that determined 'what's going to happen' in life. But in addition to these influences, she also believed in 'fate' and 'that everything happens for a reason'. Combining genetic and environmental determinism with a less scientific belief in fate and destiny consoled Megan and helped her to make sense of what happened in her life.

David also offered what he considered to be a 'scientific' explanation for his beliefs 'in the paranormal'. This meant that rather than thinking of ghosts as spirits of the dead, he imagined them as entities that existed within a parallel universe. He compared these spirits to 'radio frequencies' that 'orbit around' us but would occasionally 'overlap' so that we 'see things or hear things' from other universes. Whereas ghosts were from another universe, he thought that 'aliens are in every universe', because there had been many 'people claiming to see an alien'. The credibility of other people's experiences was also important for his own beliefs about reincarnation, heaven and hell, which were based on other people's recollections of 'past lives' and descriptions of 'near death experiences'. Martha also took seriously the possibility that there were ghosts and spirits in the world, partly because she believed 'there's got to be other stuff out there cos it would be pretty boring otherwise', but also because, even if some sightings of ghosts could be explained as

‘people walking around with sheets on their heads’, there were ‘things that have genuinely baffled scientists’:

I do think ghosts exist because I do kind of understand the unfinished business side of things cos it does make sense that if you didn’t finish something you would kind of be floating around and trying to finish it ... I almost don’t think that they’re like the actual person, I kind of more think that they are its essence or soul or whatever, trying to make heads or tails of what’s happened...

For a few participants, belief in God was not something that needed to be justified by empirical evidence or philosophical argument. Rather their personal experiences of being comforted through prayer had convinced them of God’s presence in their lives. Although David was aware of ‘scientific arguments for why the universe was created’, he maintained a belief in God as ‘the person who created everything’. While some of the arguments about the origin of universe might ‘make you confused’ and unsure about what to believe, his belief that he could pray whenever he felt ‘desperate’ seemed to appeal more than scientific explanations for the origin of the universe. Whenever he felt ‘down or upset’ he would stroke his pet cat, which would often make him ‘feel better afterwards’, and prayer functioned similarly for David, in as much as it comforted him and helped him to feel calm, secure and less ‘alone’. Laura also thought that, although the support and guidance that her family provided helped her most of the time, there were moments when she felt the need to pray for additional help and reassurance. When she was upset and worried by the news coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings, she had prayed about it because it ‘felt like it was something that I could do’ and made her feel ‘more proactive’. As praying was also something that ‘other people would be doing’

at that time, this practice helped Laura realise that she was not ‘alone in worrying about it’.

The following section examines one way in which data about similar beliefs has been interpreted by some scholars of religion, raising the question of whether such beliefs should be considered ‘religious’. This is followed by sections that demonstrate how a relational and bottom-up approach to the study of non-religion (Quack 2014) can help us to better understand what participants’ beliefs about life after death, the supernatural and prayer mean for their relationships to religion.

7.2 The Fuzziness of Belief

In recent years, social scientists debating secularisation have questioned whether many of the people who no longer feel they belong to an organised religion but who hold beliefs similar to those of my participants should be categorised as ‘religious’ (Bruce 2002; Voas & Crockett 2005; Voas 2009). Scholars of religion can respond to this question by drawing comparisons with more traditional or orthodox understandings of beliefs about or concepts of God, the afterlife and the supernatural highlighting the often idiosyncratic nature of individuals’ beliefs. For example, in their study of adults and young people who believe in reincarnation in England, Tony Walters and Helen Waterhouse are keen to highlight the differences between their respondents’ beliefs and those of the religious traditions in which they originated. They write:

Both Hindu and Buddhist scriptures teach that the individual can create good or bad karma and thus affect his or her future incarnations. However, when our respondents talked of karma they all held to the idea of learning and developing from one life to the next, ideas compatible with the Western notions of self-determination and progress. They felt we have some autonomy

in choosing whether, or how fast, we learn, and hence how soon, and in what form, we reincarnate (1999:194).

They note in particular that ‘western society’s two major beliefs systems, namely Christianity and secularism’, have influenced ‘reincarnation belief’ in England (1999:187). Respondents related reincarnation to secular beliefs about self-determination and progress, and viewed it as ‘a school for learning’ that was similar to purgatory – a Christian doctrine which, Walters and Waterhouse note, ‘has been downplayed since the Second Vatican Council’. However, they suggest that, as the notion of ‘spiritual purification still attracts’, westerners might try to blend this concept with reincarnation because the ‘prospect of doing one’s lessons down here’ is perhaps ‘more attractive than the Catholic purgatory, and certainly more attractive than the Protestant refusal to let anyone re-take any lessons at all once this life is over’ (1999:194). Reincarnation belief was held by respondents who ‘revealed some connection with a church’ as well (1999:189), but it was also a belief that respondents revealed had very little relevance to their day-to-day lives; it did not ‘affect their practical morality to any significant extent’. Walters and Waterhouse therefore describe reincarnation as ‘the ultimate detached, private belief’ (1999:195).

Andrew Singleton makes a similar argument about the afterlife beliefs of young people in Australia. Drawing on some of his earlier research into the spiritual lives of young people (Mason *et al.* 2007), Singleton argues that ‘afterlife belief’, including reincarnation belief, is ‘idiosyncratic’ (2012:454). In common with Walters and Waterhouse’s respondents, many young Australians’ beliefs about reincarnation differ from Hindu and Buddhist understandings of this concept, providing ‘comfort rather than an imperative for living an ethical life now, out of concern for what might happen in the next life’ (2012:459). Singleton’s respondents also expressed beliefs in

heaven that were ‘self-authenticated’ and ‘individualised’, and ‘only a minority’ of respondents ‘were genuinely familiar with or faithful to creeds of a traditional religion’ (2012:462). He notes that this finding is similar to Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton’s observation that ‘most religious teenagers’ in the United States ‘do not really comprehend what their own religious traditions say they are supposed to believe’, or ‘do understand it and simply don’t care to believe it’ (2005:134). According to Smith and Denton, many Christian teenagers were unable to provide ‘coherent accounts of the basic important religious beliefs of their own faith traditions’ (2005:137). While the ‘vast majority’ of their participants thought that religion was ‘very important in their lives’ (2005:129), Smith and Denton question this claim, arguing that ‘religion actually appears to operate much more as a taken-for-granted aspect of life’ and is something that ‘becomes salient only under very specific conditions’ (2005:130).

Voas makes related observations about the hybridisation of religious belief and the lack of importance such beliefs have for people’s day-to-day lives in a recent article on religious change in Europe. He coins the term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ to describe the ‘uncommitted’ ‘loyalty’ of many people to Christianity, who ‘are neither regular churchgoers... nor self-consciously non-religious’ (2009:155). He also uses the term ‘popular heterodoxy’ to describe the beliefs of these ‘fuzzy Christians’, which are a mixture of ‘elements of astrology, reincarnation, divination, magic, folk religion, and conventional Christianity’. He does not think that these ‘melanges’ are ‘particularly coherent’ and concludes that ‘the salience for these beliefs is typically rather low’ (2009:161-2).

All of the young people who participated in this research chose to be in a relationship of difference to their constructions of religion as metaphysical

propositional belief. But because they also held beliefs about the afterlife, the supernatural and prayer, it could be argued that some of them might still be described as ‘religious’. But, it is important to stress, given my bottom-up approach to the study of young people who report no religion, participants did not consider holding beliefs adapted from religions to mean that they were ‘religious’. For example, Ellie told me that beliefs about her deceased grandmother watching over her did not have ‘anything to do with being religious or not being religious’. I therefore depart from considerations of whether holding such beliefs means participants are ‘religious’ – although the question of ‘non-religious’ identity is addressed in the next chapter – to focus instead on what participants understand by religion and on their relationships to this construction, as well as what these beliefs mean to them, how they relate to other aspects of their lives and how they function in their self-interpretations.

This focus on understanding the relationships people have to their understandings of religion has been advocated by some of the scholars working in the emerging field of non-religion and secularity studies. Instead of ‘top-down’ determinations of whether the beliefs people hold are ‘religious’, researchers should, as Quack has suggested, try to ‘understand why and how people declare themselves nonreligious or are described as such’ (2014:463). Quack provides a further development of Lee’s (2012a) relational approach to the study of non-religion, and argues against the necessity of a fixed definition of the concept. He notes that there are ‘a growing number of people who apparently distance themselves in diverse ways – either explicitly or implicitly – from religious traditions and ways of life’ (2014:440). Understanding the diversity of ways in which people do this should be the focus of empirical studies of non-religion. For Quack, this should not lead to the formation of a ‘substantialist understanding of “nonreligion”’ that assumes that ‘non-

religion is “something” that has clear definitions’. Instead, we should recognise that ‘there are different ways of demarcating and interrelating religious and nonreligious fields’ (2014:448). Rather than arguing for ‘any kind of essentialized distinction between religious, nonreligious, and areligious phenomena’, we should recognise that ‘these relationships can be of different kinds, stronger or weaker, and may change over time’ (2014:456). Researchers should therefore explore the nature of the relationships (of difference) between what participants construct as ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ and ‘non-religion’ and ‘non-religious’. For Quack, this approach might involve consideration of what is implied by participants’ ‘understandings of “religious” beliefs, behaviours, and belongings’ as well as consideration of what significance the ‘alleged nonreligiosity’ might have for participants’ ‘own beliefs, behaviours and belongings’ (2014:463).

The above empirical studies suggest that the metaphysical beliefs held by many modern westerners – including my participants – lack coherence, are a confused mixture of beliefs from several traditions that differ wildly from the separate religions from which they are taken, and lack salience in everyday life. However, by emphasising the ‘problems’ with the content of these beliefs, it is arguable that researchers miss the significance of how such beliefs function in people’s lives. For example, William’s belief that, although it was not possible to remember past lives, his current life would be remembered in subsequent lives is inconsistent at the level of *content*. But the apparent incongruity of this belief *functions* to emphasise the significance his current life has for him. In order to understand what holding such beliefs meant to the participants, and why young people who reject religion continue to hold beliefs in the afterlife, the supernatural and prayer, my research seeks to understand how such beliefs functioned in

participants' lives and why they were thought to be worth retaining when other elements of religious traditions were jettisoned. Therefore, before exploring the implications of a shift from content to function of belief in more detail in Chapter Nine, the following sections of the current chapter consider how beliefs about God, the afterlife or the supernatural related to what the participants considered to be important in their lives.

7.3 Self-Improvement

During their interviews, participants often constructed narratives about achieving stability and security, overcoming obstacles and avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. Sometimes they expressed regrets about the past and were anxious about the lack of time they had to achieve their academic goals. But they would also often reflect on their imagined futures, viewing their present lives as part of a larger narrative in which, through careful self-improvement, they would eventually fulfil their ambition of living a good life. But, for some participants, the narrative of self-improvement was also closely related to their beliefs about life after death.

Some young people believed that overcoming obstacles and continual self-improvement was an important part of making the most of the one life they had, now and in the future. However, for others, believing in the possibility that they might be able to correct past mistakes and continue to improve in some form of afterlife provided them with additional reassurance and comfort during the present moment, had helped them in the past, or could offer solace at a later point in their lives. As none of the participants in my research were practising Hindus or Buddhists, it is not particularly surprising that their beliefs about reincarnation, rebirth and karma differed from how they have often been understood in these religious traditions. However, proximity to or distance from what might be considered 'orthodox'

understandings was not as important to them as how their own interpretations of these concepts contributed to their narratives about, for example, overcoming obstacles and correcting past mistakes. Henry had resigned himself to the fact that he would not be able to rectify past mistakes in this life, but he thought there was a chance that this might be possible after he had died. He thought that, although there was very little freedom in religion, reincarnation was more liberating than beliefs about life after death in other religious traditions. However, this was partly because he appeared to understand reincarnation as remedial:

I feel that when you die, you're going to go back as someone new and re-live the life again, but the idea is that whatever you do you've got to change what you did ... You'll get a check-list, probably, of things which you did wrong and that is probably what you'd have to do in your next life. ... And then the life after that, you'd have to make right the wrongs that you did, and then there would be an endless, endless cycle of trying to fix things...

As he believed what happened in the past was 'irreversible', and that he had 'done things in the past' of which he was not proud, reincarnation was understood as an opportunity to 'start afresh', making different choices in similar situations to hopefully create different outcomes. Henry also thought that this Hindu concept offered 'a much more exciting' prospect than the possibility of heaven or hell, because 'if I lived again, I'd be able to do different things' and have 'a different experience.' Rather than understanding reincarnation as something over which he would have little control, Henry saw it as an opportunity to correct past mistakes and to experience more life on earth, which was preferable to going 'somewhere better' like heaven.

Zoe also thought that there had to be some form of afterlife because she believed it important to ‘build’ a good life. Despite uncertainty over whether reincarnation or heaven was more likely, however, she felt that there had to be a continuation of life after death as part of the point of such work in this life:

You can’t work up to something after all these years, and say you died at sixty, you’ve been alive for sixty years, you’ve built up so much, you can’t just go, there has to be something to follow on, to achieve things.

For Zoe, an afterlife made self-improvement in this life more meaningful, even if she was unsure what this would look like. William thought similarly, but the importance he placed on personal achievement in life meant that he felt he could make decisions about what to believe about the afterlife. Although he felt that it was ‘impossible’ to provide ‘proof’ or ‘evidence’ for or against either ‘rebirth’ or the existence of God, he chose to believe in the former because he viewed the latter as someone who ‘determines life and death’ and ‘dictates the happenings of events’. William often gave the impression that he had already mapped out and planned his life, and that he was now following his own self-determined route from school to university and on to a career. He did not want to accept that his physical death would be the end of life, and so rebirth offered a ‘theory’ of what would happen that both reassured him that this was not the end and offered more freedom in this life and the next than his understanding of theistic belief. For William and Zoe, working hard throughout their lives seemed to lack purpose if it was not followed by something else.

As the example of William indicates, participants’ emphasis on personal development often made reincarnation more attractive than heaven. But participants sometimes believed that there could be other ways to experience more chances for self-improvement or opportunities to fulfil their goals before they reached heaven as

their final destination. Rachel, for example, thought ghosts were people who had died and ‘come back to sort of fulfil the rest of their life’. While they might not have been able to improve their lives when they were alive, they had another chance to ‘complete’ something ‘before they go to heaven’.

The importance of prayer for Karl appears to relate more to psychological self-healing and self-development than self-improvement, however. He drew a distinction between his own experience of praying to God for help and the prayers of people who followed a religion who, he felt, spent ‘time praying to something that’s probably not even there, just praying to thin air, when you could be actually enjoying yourself’. But during a particularly difficult time in his life, he said he had ‘turned to God’. Shortly after his parents separated, he began to ‘self-harm’ and had been admitted to a local hospital. His mother and father would visit him throughout his stay, having to take ‘loads of time off’ which made him feel guilty. Concerns that he was letting them down contributed to his sense of desperation, which eventually led him to ask God for help:

And at that time I really didn’t know what to do and there was a couple of nights where I was just, like, praying, like, God, if you’re there, just, like, give me strength, just, like, what am I supposed to do? Just help me.

He remembered feeling unsure whether prayer had helped him because ‘things were already getting better’. What he thought at the time had been influenced by the Hollywood film *Bruce Almighty*, the message of which he thought was that ‘[God] doesn’t really solve anything, he just, like, helps you do the work’. Although this episode seemed to reassure him that whenever life became particularly difficult he could always pray for help, he interpreted prayer as an activity that had enabled him to concentrate on recovering and overcoming his difficulties by himself. He said that

‘[God] was probably just going to give me the chance to help myself, and kind of build my strength so that I could kind of get somewhere in my life.’ Karl therefore seemed somewhat ambivalent about this experience, such that prayer as a theistic practice appears to have played a role in his life even though he did not believe in God. Prayer at this time in Karl’s life appears to be framed as a practice of self-healing, but one that ultimately enabled him to ‘get somewhere’ within the broader narrative, shared with other participants, of self-improvement.

7.4 Maintaining Connections

Stacey was attracted to what she considered to be a Christian understanding of heaven where ‘you get sort of rewarded’, but ‘if you’ve done something bad, God will punish you for what you’ve done’. Rachel also thought it was necessary to ‘be rewarded’ in life, so she believed in ‘heaven and stuff like that’. But she was ‘not so religious’ that she believed in ‘hell or anything like that’, which she thought would be ‘unfair to the people who did wrong in their lives’. But participants’ beliefs about heaven and related forms of the afterlife were more often linked to their desire to maintain important relationships from this life in the next. Participants’ objections to private, individualised propositional beliefs of a metaphysical nature were mostly directed towards Christianity, which was often considered to be representative of religion more generally. But, for participants who were worried that their important relationships with other people might come to an end at death, being able to maintain connections with the people in their lives who provided them with stability and security was important enough to adapt beliefs from this religion. These included belief in some form of resurrection and in heaven-like realms where it would be possible to communicate with the living.

Katie chose not to believe in God and thought that most miracles had a rational explanation. However, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was different. She thought it was necessary to accept this possibility because she also wanted to believe that her own life would continue in some form after she died, allowing her to 'connect' with people left behind. It was also important to believe that relatives who had already passed away were able to comfort and reassure her from beyond the grave. Katie therefore believed in 'something like heaven', which she described as 'a white room where everyone is wearing white'. In this white room, there would be a large screen TV on which 'you get to watch your life from when you were born to when you die' and 'watch the family members that are still alive'. Being able to see what was happening to her family, rather than being left alone, was in many ways the most important part of her belief in an afterlife; it would also be possible to 'go down to earth and just see them for a bit'. She thought that a visit from a deceased loved one would comfort her family and friends, and she imagined how she would feel if one of her relatives appeared to her at their funeral, reassuring her by saying, 'Don't be sad, I'm still here'. She also said that the ghosts that visited 'haunted houses' were those 'that want to talk to people', who do not wish to be forgotten and 'want to tell their story'.

Maintaining connections and communicating across boundaries between the living and the dead was also why Rachel directed prayers towards her deceased grandparents. Even though her prayers had a similar structure to religious prayers to God, and adopted the same actions of putting 'hands together', she did not consider them to be a religious practice. They were simply a way of continuing her relationship with her loving and supportive grandparents. For Katie, the spirits of the dead were 'just out there' and also had nothing to do with God or religion. She had

formed strong connections with the people she loved and hoped these would not be broken later in life, either when she moved away from home or when she died. She did not follow a religion, but being ‘spiritual’ was important because it meant that ‘you can still connect to your dead relatives and they’ll always be there for you, and you’ll always know they’re there’. Ellie told me that her personal encounters with deceased relatives did not have ‘anything to do with being religious or not being religious’, but they had influenced her beliefs about life after death. She said that she used to have dreams about her grandmother ‘standing in my room’, and had thought that she could also ‘smell her sometimes’. But now that she was ‘older’, she no longer had such experiences and was unsure whether to ‘really believe in it’. However, as her grandmother had been ‘a big Catholic’, Ellie thought that she might ‘want to look out for me’. There might, therefore, be a ‘spirit world’ in which somebody might be ‘looking out for you’. Ellie had visited a clairvoyant with her mother, and had believed what ‘the fortune teller said cos it was very true’, with such ‘freaky’ parallels being drawn with her mother’s life that she also said, ‘I don’t like to think about it.’

Joanne shared Ellie’s discomfort in relation to the supernatural, as well as her fear of being disappointed by believing in things that might not be ‘true’. While Joanne could not personally verify many supernatural occurrences, she thought that her mother’s experiences with a clairvoyant ‘might be real’, however, and therefore more believable than other stories she had heard, because she trusted the person who had reported these things. Being able to trust the personal testimonies of others was important when participants felt that experiential rather than empirical evidence might help them decide what to believe about the supernatural. While Ben would not believe in ghosts simply because of claims made in stories or on television, he would

believe if ‘someone close... was affected by it’. Although Karl had ‘never actually seen a ghost’ or ‘experienced anything supernatural’, he trusted his father’s account of seeing the ghost of a nun near a local abbey and thought that the experiential evidence for the existence of ghosts – ‘thousands, probably millions of cases’ – was more credible than the evidence for the existence of God.

7.5 The (Lasting) Significance of Life

Participants’ beliefs about life after death, the supernatural and prayer had functioned in relation to matters of importance in their lives, specifically their narratives of self-improvement and their relationships with loved ones. But other participants unambiguously disbelieved in God, dismissed the possibility of life after death and rejected all forms of supernaturalism. However, these beliefs had similarly important functions in these young people’s lives.

Rather than believe that they might be able to correct past mistakes in their next lives or that their lives might continue in another form after death, some participants chose to focus in their interviews on what they believed to be the one life they had. This often meant believing in the importance of seizing opportunities and making the most of their lives, as well as helping other people and not causing harm. Michael believed that when ‘you die, you get put in the ground and that’s the end of your life’, so it was important to recognise that we have ‘been given an opportunity to have a life in the first place’. Rather than ‘believe that you turn into a ghost and haunt people’, he thought he should try to ‘make sure I’ve filled it [life] to my contentment’. Nick thought that it was important to ‘grasp the opportunities in life cos it’s your only chance’. He said that ‘nothing’ would happen after he died, and rejected the idea that ‘if you do anything wrong, you’ll kind of get reincarnated as a snail’. Instead, leading a moral life was its own reward, as he found ‘helping people

out all the time' enabled him to feel 'good' about himself. Daniel found it was useful to imagine what it would be like to reflect on his life as a whole before he reached its end, and to ask the question: 'Did I enjoy what I did and with the choices I made?' This helped him conclude that he should 'always care for the people that care for you' and 'treat people how you would like to be treated yourself'.

Besides leading a good and fulfilled life, it was also important for some participants who expressed disbelief in God, religion and the supernatural to recognise the significance of their relationships with people who had lived before them as well as future generations who would live on after they had died. These participants talked about deceased relatives, ancestors and participants' future descendants, as well as the history of life on earth and the universe as a whole. Although Alice did not believe in God and rejected all forms of supernatural belief, she also recognised the significance of being part of a larger narrative. Her decision to become a vegetarian was partly influenced by what she thought of as her relationship to other species of animal, and she would also express amazement at how vast the universe was and at how her own life would only occupy a tiny fragment within a great expanse of time. Although this meant that she did not want to 'waste this opportunity' she had been 'given', her beliefs about the importance of continually striving to improve were not motivated by a sense that there is 'a bigger purpose' to life. She did not think that there was 'any purpose to us being here', at least there was not 'some outer purpose besides what you decide is your purpose'. She believed that at the end of our physical life, we are 'eaten by maggots and worms and then excreted into the soil', our 'energy' is passed into the 'carbon cycle' and it 'all just goes on'. However, she also thought that accepting life's finitude gave it more meaning than if she continued to believe in life after death:

Well, I kind of think that if there is something more after you die, then why are we doing this bit? ... Um, I think it gives it more meaning if this is it. ... If you're like, 'Oh well, I'll do that later in my eternal life', then it's like, well, I don't see the point of this stage. If this is it, then it's incredibly important.

Rather than accept what Alice described as the 'outer' meaning and purpose that formed part of her Christian upbringing, it was necessary to create a meaning herself that could be fulfilled in her lifetime rather than after her death.

For some of these participants, then, rather than believe that their lives might continue after they die, it was more important to lead fulfilling and moral lives in what they felt was the one life they had. Their beliefs about life and, for some, about the end of life, provided them with meaning and purpose. Being aware of the transient nature of their existence helped them to find a deeper significance to life or they found consolation in imagining themselves to be part of a larger narrative about the universe and life on earth. For some, their part in such narratives was nothing more than one little story amongst many other little stories, to adopt a phrase used by Abigail in another context. But, for others, this type of broader narrative also reassured them of the significance of their own individual lives. An interesting and important area for future research in this area would be to further examine whether the narratives in which participants like these located themselves and through which they found meaning and purpose – for example, about making the most of this life now or caring for animals and the environment – also bolstered their sense of their own *lasting* significance beyond death, as belief in an afterlife did for other participants. My interview with Craig is a good example where this was a possibility.

Craig initially rejected the idea that there might be life after death but he also said that his ancestors were important to him because of the transmission of their genes and this was how he imagined he too might live on beyond his physical death. To begin with, Craig said that he simply took comfort in knowing that his DNA would live on in the lives of his ‘children and their children’ and would therefore ‘live forever’ by ‘going down generations’. However, unlike the other four participants who rejected all forms of supernaturalism, Craig thought that his ancestors were ‘within’ him spiritually:

Because ancestor’s spirits go within you and you feel the pain that they’ve been through and you feel they’re part of you. Cos they’re part of you and the reason you are who you are ... And that’s where I’ve come from, so I do feel spiritual about that cos there’s spirits of ancestors within me.

This more spiritual interpretation of his relationship with his ancestors emerged after a retelling of a ghost story in which he thought he had seen the spirit of his great, great grandmother. He then expressed doubts about his earlier more scientific interpretation of life after death, as this experience ‘sort of hints towards the fact it [death] isn’t the end’. Although the two explanations of what life after death meant to him differed, they both suggested that some form of continuing existence was important to him. As it was also important that he did not feel alone, it was comforting to be helped through life by the ancestors that he believed were ‘within’ him, genetically and/or spiritually. This was perhaps why, when asked to expand upon what he meant by ‘spiritual’, he explained that it meant ‘family’. As well as living on through his descendants, Craig also believed his life might have a lasting influence on the future because of what he thought about ‘respecting the planet’, which he believed was central to Buddhism:

Because if you respect the planet, it's going to go on for longer and go on through future generations, and on to your children and their children and their children, and so on. The way you are, is going to affect the way that they live because of how the earth is and how we treat it.

Craig found consolation in the idea that he might 'live on' in the lives of his descendants. But, by caring for the environment now, future generations might benefit, and so he also consoled himself with the thought that this might be how his life could continue to be significant after he had died.

For both those who expressed belief in God, the afterlife and the supernatural and those who expressed disbelief, then, belief functioned to stress the significance they gave to their lives. Most frequently, this was a significance that they felt would outlast their own lives. In other words, while the content of belief differed and existed in *a variety of relationships of difference to religion* – relationships that were also given *different degrees of importance* in participants' self-interpretations, as is discussed in the next chapter – the beliefs that they told me about had similar *functions*.

Conclusion

Lee (2012a;2013) and Quack (2014) emphasise the importance of adopting a relational rather than substantialist approach to the study of non-religion. For Quack, non-religion should not 'be understood as something that has a thing-like existence'. The term should instead be 'used to denote the various ways that relationships between a religious field and positions considered to be on the outside are established' (2014:448). This usage allows for a broader interpretation of non-religion that is helpful for examining participants' understanding of religion and what they mean by having none.

As was noted in Chapter Six and is developed in Chapter Eight, participants differentiated themselves from their understandings of religion by ticking the ‘no religion’ box, describing themselves as ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’, and/or being ‘anti-religious’ in their objections to what were understood as religious ethical beliefs. Religion was rejected as private, individualised metaphysical and/or ethical belief but, as this chapter has demonstrated, some nonetheless held beliefs about life after death, the supernatural and prayer. They did not consider this to be problematic, however, partly because beliefs about an afterlife, for example, did not, in Ellie’s words, have ‘anything to do with being religious or not being religious’. That is to say, such beliefs did not have anything to do with participants’ constructions of religion. For some, believing in a personal God who might help them to help themselves, or reassure them when they felt anxious, was very important at times when they felt desperate or alone. For others, believing in life after death, as well as holding supernatural beliefs that were supported by experiential evidence from people they trusted, reassured them that relationships with people they loved would continue after they have died. There were some young people who believed in reincarnation or rebirth because it reassured them that they could correct past mistakes and continually improve themselves. And, for others, their beliefs about life and the end of life enabled them to view their lives as part of a larger narrative which similarly reassured them of their significance. Rather than emphasising the incoherence of these beliefs, or the inconsistent way in which they are held, focusing on how such beliefs reflect matters of importance to participants and function in their lives makes it easier to see why such beliefs remained significant for these young people.

Following a religion did not appeal to participants because religion was thought to necessarily entail believing in a creator God, in miraculous events for which there was not enough evidence, and following rules and commandments that would limit their experiences. But participants adapted beliefs and concepts from religious traditions that complemented their sense of living authentically, contributed to their narratives of self-improvement, or confirmed the significance of their present lives and offered the possibility of continuing their lives after death. As Quack notes, it is important to recognise that ‘relationships [to religion] can be of different kinds, stronger and weaker and may change over time’ (2014:456). Understanding participants’ relationships to different elements within religious traditions, might help explain why a particular construction of religion has little significance for them whilst, at certain times, modified religious beliefs could nonetheless be of value and significance to their lives. The following chapter explores in more detail what significance these different relationships of difference to religion had for these young people, which helps in answering the question of whether indicating ‘no religion’ on a questionnaire is expressive of a non-religious identity. The value of exploring how belief functions in young people’s lives is then explored further in Chapter Nine, and in the Conclusion a shift from content to function of belief in the study of religion is contrasted with recent recommendations made by the BHA that remain focused on the content of propositional beliefs.

Chapter Eight: ‘No Religion’

Introduction

Having looked at participants’ constructions of religion as belief and at their relationships of difference to religion through examining their beliefs and disbeliefs about God, the afterlife and the supernatural, this chapter considers some of the assumptions made about how these findings relate to issues of identity. In particular, it examines some of the problems with how the concept of *non-religious* identity has been related to the ‘no religion’ box on censuses and questionnaires. When 14.1 million people reported having no religion on the 2011 Census, Copson claimed that the data meant that ‘non-religious identities’ were ‘on the rise’ (BHA 2012). While many participants understood religion to be concerned with certain metaphysical and ethical beliefs that they did not share, as detailed in Chapter Six, that chapter also began the move from common-sense assumptions about what responses to the religion question indicates to more nuanced understandings of the diversity of relationships to religion that those people who ticked ‘no religion’ might have. Chapter Seven explored some of the participants’ relationships to metaphysical beliefs adapted from different religious traditions but, rather than describing these young people as religious, it was more helpful to consider the significance of these individuals’ beliefs and how they related to other aspects of their lives. This chapter draws together findings to determine whether and how participants express non-religious identities by examining *the different degrees of significance* their relationships of difference to religion held within the self-interpretations they shared with me during our interviews.

For each of the young people, it was important that they had made their own decisions in reporting no religion. In our interviews, some described themselves as

atheist or agnostic and their self-interpretations revealed that this stance played quite an important part in their lives. For others, however, their non-theistic stance in relation to religion was less significant in their lives and ticking the ‘no religion’ box simply reflected their disbelief in God when asked. As detailed in the previous chapter, there were also participants who expressed less clearly defined relationships to religion, some of whom were unsure what to think about religion, while others believed in God and life after death but did not consider themselves to be religious enough to tick one of the other boxes. And there were also young people for whom religion and religious belief seemed largely irrelevant, but who were also uninterested in articulating non-religious beliefs or in actively rejecting religion. This chapter therefore builds on former chapters to focus in particular on the relative importance that participants give to their relationships to religion, their reasons for reporting no religion and the implications of these findings for questions relating to identity. In particular, it argues that the extent to which participants’ constructions of religion and relationships of difference to such constructions appear to be *significant* or *insignificant* in the context of their self-interpretations is of primary importance for determining whether participants might be claiming an identity by ticking the ‘no religion’ box.

The chapter begins with further analysis of interview data that stems primarily from participants’ responses to questions about why they chose to report ‘no religion’ by ticking this box on the questionnaire, but participants expressed a variety of atheist, agnostic and less clearly defined relationships to religion at various points, especially when they related questions about belief or rights and wrongs to religion earlier in the interviews. The chapter then discusses the significance of engaging with religion and theism within participants’ wider lives, focusing on what

this might mean for the concept of non-religious identity. There are many different ways in which the term ‘identity’ has been used in recent years (e.g. Erikson 2004[1968]; Foucault 1998[1976]; Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Somers 1994; Bradley 1996; Hall 1996) but, following the discussion of Taylor’s understanding of self and identity in Chapter Four, this chapter considers the participants’ ‘self-interpretations’ to be indicative of their self-identities (1989:34). It explores in particular how significant having no religion was for participants’ ‘self-understandings’ (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) and, consequently, for their self-identities. The chapter closes by exploring whether the category of ‘no religion’ is more helpful in describing the relationships of difference young people have to religion than non-religious identities such as atheist or agnostic – a possibility that is taken up once more in Chapter Nine.

8.1 Choosing ‘No Religion’

Some participants had carefully considered whether to tick the ‘no religion’ box when completing their questionnaires and took me through their thought processes when doing so during our interview. For Stacey and Katie, deciding to report no religion involved a process of elimination, discounting religions with which they did not identify until ‘no religion’ was the remaining choice. Stacey held beliefs about God, as well as about karma and reincarnation, but she also considered the level of one’s commitment to be a measure of one’s religiosity and these beliefs were not accompanied by religious practice, so reporting no religion seemed most appropriate. Katie believed in both spirits and the resurrection of Jesus, but as she did not believe in God she had thought, ‘I can’t be a Christian’. The category of ‘no religion’ therefore provided her with the freedom to hold beliefs that were important to her without feeling obliged to believe in the existence of a God that she thought

contradicted what she had learnt in science. It was important for both Michael and Nick to freely choose to tick ‘no religion’ themselves and, in making their decisions, both had also thought in particular about the type of evidence ‘backing up religion’ (Nick) compared to the theories of ‘the Big Bang and evolution, and things like that’ (Michael). The absence of evidence was also part of the reason Jack knew that he was not a Christian, but in addition he drew a distinction between his own beliefs about the origins of the universe and the creationist beliefs of some of his Christian relatives, who are ‘completely against the theory of evolution’.

Daniel thought he was now old enough to decide what he believed, but the difficulties he was experiencing at home, as well as the frustration he felt about not being able to enjoy certain activities because of his worries about what other people might think, meant that he did not always feel confident in making decisions in life. Freely choosing to tick the ‘no religion’ box without being influenced by others was therefore particularly important for him:

I ticked it because I don’t believe in any of the religions, but even if my friends or my family have, really, because I believe that’s a decision I’ve made in my life and if I’ve made it, I should sort of stick to it.

Although Daniel had not been ‘brought up on a religion’, he felt he had reached this decision without being influenced by his family. But he thought that making the decision not to follow a religion would have been more difficult if he had received a religious upbringing. Rather than receiving beliefs or morals that his family had consciously derived from religious teachings, he had been given more general ethical guidance. He thought that being ‘brought up to always care for the people that care for you, and treat people how you would like to be treated yourself’ was preferable to being brought up in a religious family, where ‘you’ll automatically think that’s right

cos you've been told about it early'. Although he did not consider the possibility that being raised in this way might inform one's beliefs as much as a religious upbringing, Daniel believed that his experience had given him the necessary freedom to decide for himself not to be 'in a religion at the moment'.

For Henry, this had been part of the appeal of the 'no religion' category. While discussing religion was not something that was very central to his life as a teenager, this did not mean that he completely ruled out the possibility of following a religion at some future point in his life:

But at the moment, when I'm a teenager and you're experiencing stuff and learning new stuff and your whole life is around, and you're trying to figure out how things are going to work as a teenager, and what life is like as a teenager, I don't think you need to have a religion at that point.

It was good to know that religions existed because later in life he might be searching for 'answers' and this was something that they provided. However, as a teenager, life was just becoming interesting and the possibilities that lay ahead should not be limited by the 'guidelines and rules' set down by religion. It remained important, however, to keep this 'option' open.

Both external factors and individual agency influenced participants' decisions to tick the 'no religion' box on the questionnaire. While it was important for them to decide for themselves that they had no religion, their choices were also affected by other influences, including what they had learnt about science, their understandings of different religions and of how their own beliefs differed from these, and their upbringing and what family members thought about religion. But they were especially motivated by their past experiences of religion and what they thought having a religious identity would involve.

It was quite common for participants to have experienced religious practices and rituals as boring, meaningless or incomprehensible. Laura's decision to report no religion was partly influenced by her experience of attending church with her mother. For the most part, this was 'a bit of a chore', which made her feel that, if she were to find a 'church or place of worship' that was more interesting, she might 'be more religious'. But for some of the other participants, their experience of attending church services had been incomprehensible or meaningless. Joanne did not express positively atheist or even agnostic beliefs, and she appeared to be largely indifferent to religion as belief in God and confused about the veracity of such beliefs. But religious rituals and practices were also difficult to comprehend, which may account for her apparent indifference towards a service she had to attend at a cathedral to mark the start of Year 10: 'People sang, lit candles, and spoke – I'm not sure what about...I just didn't really understand. I just sat there and didn't really do much.' These rituals and practices not only seemed alien to Joanne. She felt that they required participation, but involvement in a service that was confusing or believing in things that were possibly not 'true' meant that Joanne thought it was important to maintain her independence from religion.

Henry and Ben had slightly more ambivalent experiences of religion. Although as Scouts they had both happily participated in church services and religious ceremonies, these experiences were not considered to be particularly important to their lives. Henry was happy to take part by 'singing the songs and stuff' providing he did not have to follow the ethical 'guidelines and rules' of Christianity. Although these experiences seemed to have made little impact on his life, Ben recalled one occasion when he had to be slightly more involved in religion. As an Explorer, one of his responsibilities had been to 'invest' other young people

into the Scouts, and this experience had made him reflect on the possible conflict between making the Scout promise ‘to do my duty to God.’ But the pleasure Ben got from being a Scout outweighed his doubts about religion and belief in God, and felt able to make the promise even though he ‘wasn’t religious’.²⁹

Other participants’ reported no religion because of what they thought religious identity entailed. Abigail believed that identifying with a religious tradition such as Christianity would place limitations on her freedom to think for herself. Unlike her mother, who appeared to understand a ‘Christian’ identity as the one received as part of an infant baptism, Abigail thought that such an identity required greater commitment:

...my mum says I’m a Christian, she says, like, because I’ve been christened I’m a Christian, but to me, just because I’ve been christened doesn’t make me a Christian... I think for me, there would never be a religion that would fit with all that I thought because my thoughts are so diverse. Um, [pause] there would never be a religion for everything I thought.

Rather than accept this identity, or even adopt a pick-and-mix approach to Christianity, Abigail seems to suggest that the religion would need to change to ‘fit’ her own unique perspective.

Because she had been christened, Martha did describe herself as a ‘Christian’ during our interview, but she was critical of Christianity and other religions for being ‘too regimented’ and ‘restricting’ and was instead interested in Wicca, which she thought was more liberating. Martha chose to write ‘Becoming Wiccan’ next to the

²⁹ The Scout Association has now introduced an ‘alternative’ that is thought to be more ‘inclusive’ (Scout Association 2013). Ben would have welcomed this, feeling that Scouts who did not believe in God should have ‘a promise that they can fully follow’.

‘no religion’ box. But she did not mean by this that, while she currently had no religion, she was in the process of becoming an adherent to the Wiccan religion, since she thought Wicca was a ‘belief’ – instead of considering Wicca to be a religion, she described it as ‘not a very serious’ belief. Having no religion but being interested in Wiccan beliefs provided her with a freedom that would be restricted in a religion like Christianity. As Wicca was ‘just an interest’, it did not require the same level of commitment as following a religion that needed ‘to be felt about passionately’, which was why Martha chose not to write ‘Wicca’ in the space provided on the questionnaire for ‘Other’ religions.

But writing ‘Becoming Wiccan’ next to the ‘no religion’ box also implies that simply reporting ‘no religion’ would not adequately represent her beliefs. She expressed doubts about scientific inquiry partly because she did not accept the challenge this posed for her beliefs in the supernatural, and she thought that a life without such beliefs would be ‘pretty boring’. By both choosing the category of ‘no religion’ and expressing her interest in Wicca, Martha was able to convey to me that she was neither completely against religion and belief nor fully accepting of science or atheism, a perspective on science and religion shared by other young people interested in magic and witchcraft (Cush 2010:86-7).

The category of ‘no religion’ was chosen by other participants because they wanted to differentiate themselves from a more precise non-religious identity or because they were confused about their beliefs and religious self-identification. For Ellie, it was important not to be labelled an ‘atheist’ because she did not think this accurately represented her relationship to religion:

I'm not an atheist, but I don't believe in God or any of that, I don't believe in anything like that. But I'm not an atheist – I mean I can listen to other people's opinions and respect them, but I just don't believe them at all.

Ellie came from a religiously mixed family, but she said that had no religion because of the influence of her father, who 'respects other people's opinions', and was 'not like a hard core atheist'; but 'just doesn't believe in God'. For Ellie, being an 'atheist' meant holding anti-religious beliefs rather than lacking a belief in God and she rejected this identity descriptor because of what she considered to be its negative connotations. Leah also feared being judged by others. She was 'a bit confused' about her religious identification and beliefs, but thought that by not following a religion she might be perceived as a 'selfish' or 'horrible person'.

8.2 Atheist, Agnostic and Less Clearly Defined Stances

Many of the participants related their reasons for reporting no religion to their atheist or agnostic stances towards religion, while others described less clearly defined relationships of difference to their constructions of religion.

Seven of the participants described themselves as atheists (Alice, Craig, Henry, Katie, Megan, Michael and Zoe) and four expressed atheist beliefs, such as belief in the non-existence of God, without self-identifying in this way (Daniel, Ellie, Karl and Nick). Of these, only Alice, Michael, Daniel and Nick were unambiguous in expressing their disbelief in the existence of God and in life after death or the supernatural. While the others either identified as atheists or expressed disbelief in God, other supernatural phenomena – often including the God they did not believe in – continued to play a role in their lives. Megan, for example, identified as an atheist but replaced her childhood belief in the existence of God with a belief in providential fate and now thought that 'everything happens for a reason'.

When I asked Alice why she ticked the ‘no religion’ box, she explained, ‘I used to be a Christian, I’m not anymore’. A distinction between her beliefs about religion and God and those of her family played an important part in her self-identification with atheism. Choosing to be an atheist provided her with a clearly defined stance that offered certainty, but was also in direct opposition to her parents’ Christian identity as well as that of her own childhood. Religion was now thought of as something she had outgrown:

Well, my parents are Christians and they used to take me to church ... I’m baptised and everything ... but I kind of feel like I grew up. And I feel like it’s quite a big comfort blanket ... And I want to be able to do it [live life] without that kind of thing...

But this process of losing her faith and escaping the ‘control’ of religion had been gradual. As a child she did not ‘have that awareness of how terrible things can be’, but her realisation of the problems and injustices in the world had slowly convinced her that there was no God. As a family they would discuss religion and beliefs, and this had helped her to make firm decisions about what she believed. For Alice, an atheist was not only ‘someone who doesn’t believe in God’, but also someone who ‘doesn’t *want* to believe in God’, who ‘doesn’t feel a need to’ and ‘doesn’t feel they should’, and who should also not ‘feel guilty that they don’t’. The differences between Alice and her Christian family helped to strengthen her atheist beliefs and to confidently claim a self-identification with atheism that was unapologetically constructed in terms of what it is not. For Michael, who also self-identified as an atheist, the existence and amount of evil and suffering in the world was treated as evidence that confirmed his doubts about the existence of God and enabled him to reach conclusions about the likelihood of atheist beliefs. Because there are ‘children

who are in India and Africa who are dying of starvation', either God 'can't be an all-loving God' or there is no God, and assumed that the latter explanation was most likely.

For Craig, Katie, Megan and Zoe, God continued to play a role in their lives even though they self-identified as atheists and did not believe in him. For Megan, who used 'to believe in God', the death of a close relative formed part of a gradual process of losing her faith that began with feeling anger towards God for allowing this to happen. Participants were also angry with God for remaining indifferent to the amount of suffering in the world. Craig did not believe in God, but he also expressed anger and contempt towards God for claiming to be an-all loving Father while allowing so much suffering in the world:

I don't believe there is a God. I also think if there was a God then he's a cruel God. Leaving people in Third World countries as they are ... I think God says that everything happens for a reason. But there's no reason for people to be dying of starvation. What have they done to deserve that?

Here, Craig seems to move from expressing his disbelief in God's existence to positing that if there is a God this is a cruel God, to then supposing that the very explanation for suffering that this cruel God provides in turn justifies his own disbelief in the first place. In other words, God's existence would only validate Craig's atheism. He said that people find it 'quite easy to blame God' for the suffering of others, thereby abdicating their own responsibility for trying to alleviate it. It therefore seemed that being angry towards the God that other people believed in was more important to Craig than simply expressing his own atheistic belief in God's non-existence.

Katie also expressed anger towards a God that she did not believe in. She thought that he was a supernatural being that should not interfere with human life. As she believed we are free to 'choose a good life' for ourselves, we should do what we want and not 'get pushed around by God'. Similarly, Zoe denied God's existence but continued to attribute certain powers to him, including the creation of the universe. But she told me that she was 'like an atheist' because she thought that 'being religious' meant that 'God should be in charge', whereas she thought that it was better to be 'in charge of yourself'. This meant that 'you shouldn't pray to God when you have a problem, you should sort it'. For each of these participants, then, being an 'atheist' involved more than lacking a belief, or even disbelieving in God. It was also important to express anger towards, or at least be critical of, the God they no longer believed in.

Four of the young people ticked the 'no religion' box because of their agnosticism. Abigail and Ben both chose to describe themselves in this way, and Beth and William expressed beliefs that indicated they were agnostic about the existence or non-existence of God. William told me 'I don't believe in God' but 'I also don't know whether there is a God or not'. However, as he thought it was important to have something to believe in, he had his 'own personal views' – beliefs about life after death and reincarnation that were adapted from different religions but that he said could not be 'categorised in a certain religion'. William chose to define himself as 'more of a science believer' and said that he chose 'to believe in the science part of religion, of how everything comes into existence'. This meant he was interested in what he thought of as the religious 'theories' for the origin of the universe, but ultimately thought that the scientific explanations were 'true'. By choosing not to commit to any religious tradition, he was free to hold those 'religious

beliefs and values' that he thought complemented his scientific beliefs whilst remaining agnostic about others.

Abigail's understanding of religion had also been influenced by what she had learnt in her science lessons. She could 'relate' to the concept of rebirth, or what she described as the 'Buddhist route', because she believed it was supported by science. She had learnt that 'no atoms can be created or destroyed' and this seemed to her to suggest that the same might be true of the 'spirits' that existed 'when the earth was created' and 'just keep moving into different bodies'. Here, Abigail appears to take comfort in the thought that there is a spiritual dimension to life and seems reassured that belief in this might also be supported by what she had learnt at school, making it more relatable. But, despite this important link between spirituality and science, her agnosticism in relation to belief in God was also reflected in her desire to not be characterised as someone who was 'completely science'. By this, she meant that she could both understand the view of some in her science class who dismissed the content of RE lessons as 'completely stupid' and appreciate 'why people believe in God'. It would be comforting, Abigail thought, to think 'as long as God's there, I'm not on my own' and she felt no animosity towards religion, stating explicitly that she was not 'anti-Christian'. But, for her, the possibility of being let down by God meant that the certainties offered by science were, at this stage in her life, preferable to following a religion. Her agnosticism meant, however, that the possibility of having a religion when she was older remained open. She told me: 'I'm fine with not having a religion, maybe when I'm older I'll have one'.

Ben too said that he might follow a religion later in life: if a person he could 'trust' expressed a belief in God, he might be persuaded to believe them or to also believe in God. However, 'believing in God' was just one aspect of following a

religion. It also involved regularly attending ‘a place of worship’ and ‘following the holy book of whatever religion it is’. As he did not consider these practices to be important, he identified as having ‘no religion’. But science had also played an important role in his agnosticism. He had doubts about the existence of God, but because science had not provided a conclusive explanation for what caused the Big Bang he remained agnostic about both religious and scientific explanations for the origins of the universe. Beth also expressed doubts about the continuing validity of scientific truth claims because of what she thought of the changing nature of scientific enquiry:

I don’t think everything that we’re taught in science is completely true, cos a few years ago we thought that the atom was the smallest thing on earth, and brilliant people just went by that as law and it turned out that it wasn’t.

She thought that because ‘we can only know things that we see or feel’, scientific claims beyond this were also impossible to verify. However, this also meant that she was uncertain of religious truth claims and maintained that there was not ‘an individual [religion] that is completely true’. She also thought that the question of God’s existence could never be satisfactorily answered and so belief was simply a matter of personal choice: ‘we can just choose to believe it or not’.

Beth’s connection to an agnostic world view seemed stronger than some of the other participants, partly because she thought it important to defend this stance against what she considered to be the more intolerant atheist position taken by some of her family. While she ‘never really bought the assemblies’ at her Church of England primary school, the advice of her teachers to keep an open mind about the possibility of miracles had been more influential than what she perceived as the close-minded views of her atheist parents. Neither her parents nor her brothers

believed in God and this would often lead to ‘debates’ at ‘the dinner table’. Her mother would become ‘irritated when religious people come round to talk about religion’, and her father would often mock their ‘very religious neighbours’, calling them ‘crazy’ and ‘the nutters round the corner’. But she dismissed her father’s comments and would try to ‘open his mind’ to her view that ‘there could be a God and any religion could be right and we’ll never know because we don’t have the power to know that’.

While some of the young people expressed atheist or agnostic beliefs about God, others believed in God and had a more positive relationship with religion. They therefore had less clearly defined relationships of difference to religion and less clearly identifiable stances than atheism or agnosticism. This was evident in Laura’s explanation for why she chose to tick the ‘no religion’ box on the questionnaire:

I don’t think my belief in God is strong enough for me to tick ‘Christian’, I mean I’ve been brought up to be a Christian ... I’m not really a dedicated Christian or anything, so- I mean that might change, because if there was a sort of in-between box, I probably would have ticked that, but to categorise what I believe, I’d say I don’t really have a religion.

As she was often bored by church services, Laura’s attendance was infrequent and this was part of the reason she ticked the ‘no religion’ box. However, as the questionnaire was also understood as a way of categorising what she believed, she would have liked the opportunity to tick a box in-between ‘Christian’ and ‘no religion’, which would more accurately reflect her relationship with Christianity at that time. As she thought her ‘belief in God’ was not ‘strong enough’ to self-identity as a Christian, choosing the less precise category of ‘no religion’ seemed to afford

her the opportunity to consider more deeply her beliefs about God and her relationship to Christianity.

Some of the young people with less clearly defined stances reported no religion because they shared with others the assumption that regular practice was necessary for religious affiliation. David, for example, took comfort from his belief in God; it was important for him to believe 'that there is someone up there' and 'there is a place to go once you've died'. But the reason he ticked the 'no religion' box was that he was 'not someone who prays to [God] a lot of the time'. Nor was he 'the sort of person who every week goes to church'. Stacey also identified as having 'no religion' because of the level of commitment that she thought following a religion required. However, God, as well as a number of other concepts from Christianity and Hinduism, played a part in her 'life story'. She felt that her life differed from a 'religious' one because, although she might 'sort of believe in something', a religious person would 'give you a whole life story on it', by which she meant that following a religion would affect the whole of one's life. She went on to state that she differed from a 'Christian person' because they would 'really believe in it', whereas she was just 'a bit spiritual'. Holding certain Christian and Hindu beliefs helped Stacey in her endeavour to be a good person, but she did not think that they had been significant enough to shape her own 'whole life story'.

Literature on the strategies young people employ in the formation of religious identities suggests that parallels can be drawn with the forms of agency and types of influence that contributed to participants' reasons for ticking 'no religion' and their self-interpretations of their atheist, agnostic and less clearly defined relationships of difference to religion.

8.3 Identity and the (In)Significance of Religion

In their discussion of the formation and development of young people's religious identities, social scientists Peter Hemming and Nicola Madge observe that religious identity 'is not constructed in a vacuum, but may change and evolve through an interactive process with social factors and influences' (2012:40). But they also note that this is not a 'one-way process' and that it is important to recognise the role of agency in the construction of religious identity (2012:43). Young people 'demonstrate religious and spiritual agency' through attaching 'their own value and importance to particular concepts, ideas and practices in their religious and spiritual lives'. They also 'reconfigure and renegotiate formal religious meanings and practices', and 'draw on their own faith, other religions, science, their imagination, the media and their own experiences to create frameworks of meaning' (2012:44). Hemming and Madge suggest that it is also important to consider questions of individual agency in the various 'social spaces and contexts through which religious identity is shaped'. In their relationships with their 'families, schools, friendship groups, communities, localities and the media', young people are 'actively involved in the negotiation of competing influences in the construction of their religious identities' (2012:45). This research highlights the importance of young people's agency amidst a variety of external influences shaping their identities; it is not only religion that is significant in the formation of young people's religious identities.

The relationships to religion that young people with religious identities have differ from those of young people who report no religion – those who might consider themselves to have a religious identity are more likely to have a relationship of similarity to their constructions of religion, whereas young people who tick the 'no religion' box are more likely to have relationships of difference to their constructions

of religion. But there are important parallels between the strategies and the acts of agency involved in the formation of young people's religious identities and those involved in the formation of self-interpretations and self-identities by young people of no religion. Like young people with religious identities, some of the young nones who took part in this research also attached their own value to religious concepts such as heaven, which helped reassure them they were able to maintain connections with people they loved. They also reconfigured the formal religious meanings of purgatory and reincarnation as a way of consoling them that there might be more opportunities after they died to correct past mistakes, and their experiences of praying to God were important to them at particularly stressful or distressing periods in their lives. Although many participants considered scientific evidence to be important in assessing the validity of religious truth claims, and especially those relating to the existence of God, many of the young people would also often depend upon experiential evidence from people they trusted, as well as the media, for their beliefs about past lives, aliens, and the supernatural. It was therefore clear that participants' social spaces and contexts – particularly school, family, friends, media and science – had also shaped many of their relationships of difference with religion, just as the social spaces and contexts of young people with religious identities shape their relationships of similarity.

The role of both individual agency and social factors and influences in participants' decision to tick the 'no religion' box was clear. But to what extent was this act a declaration of identity and, in particular, of 'non-religious' identity? Participants chose to differentiate themselves from religion by reporting none on their questionnaires. Even when they reported belief in God, life after death, the supernatural or prayer, participants held such beliefs in 'contradistinction' (Lee

2014:479) to their constructions of religion. In this sense, therefore, they might, following Lee's (2012a) definition of non-religion as existing in a relationships of difference to religion, be categorised as 'non-religious'. However, to what extent are they expressing a non-religious *identity* through differentiating themselves from their constructions of religion by ticking the 'no religion' box on their questionnaires or by expressing atheistic, agnostic or less clearly defined relationships of difference to religion during our interviews? Common-sense assumptions about what ticking the 'no religion' box means – like those made by Copson – would suggest that the young people who participated in this research have non-religious identities. But, following Taylor's concept of identity as a self-interpretation related to matters of importance, the question of whether participants expressed non-religious identities depends on *the relative significance of relationships of difference to religion in participants' self-interpretations*.

Such a proposal – that non-religious *identity* depends on *a relationship of difference to religion* being *important* to those who report no religion – is supported by research that suggests that claiming a non-religious identity entails significant engagement with religion. In his study of identity formation amongst members of atheist organisations in America, the sociologist Jesse M. Smith observes that atheism requires the construction and cultivation of an identity 'for which the "theist culture" at large offers no validation' (2011:215). He discovered that, by choosing to identify as atheists, his adult participants were challenging 'the norms of American culture', which meant that 'they had to specify and articulate just what their departure from this dominant way of thinking means' (2011:231). For Smith, therefore, 'much of an atheist identity is constructed in terms of what it is not' (2011:228). It was therefore necessary for his participants to '*engage* with theism'

before being able to ‘ultimately claim *atheism*’ (2011:233). A similar level of engagement with religion and theism is indicated by the atheist participants of Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lindquist Denton’s research, which formed part of the National Study of Youth and Religion project in the United States. They note that young people ‘who can clearly articulate their atheist identity’ are ‘interestingly different from youth who are simply passively disengaged from religion’ (2011:84,39).

Unlike American teenagers, the young people who described themselves as atheist in my research did not have to define themselves against what Smith describes as a ‘heavily theistic society’ (2011:216). However, it was important for some participants to differentiate themselves from a particular religious or non-religious stance taken by their families or friends, and this involved more reflection on their relationship to religion and theism than other participants who had not thought much about it. In particular, choosing the ‘no religion’ option was a way of asserting their autonomy and, especially, their independence from others, mainly their parents and wider families. Alice’s relationship to religion was perhaps most similar to the majority of atheists described by Smith, whose identity was formed in opposition to their ‘religious’ or ‘extremely religious’ upbringing (2011:220). While Alice sought to differentiate herself from her Christian upbringing, there were also young people who asserted their independence from their non-religious parents by having a more open-minded approach to religious belief and practice.

Although the role of religion in each of their families, and their reactions to this, differed, for Alice, Beth and Laura engagement with religion played an important part in the formation of their self-understandings and, therefore, in the formation of their self-identities in relation to religion, as is detailed further shortly.

However, for a number of other participants, religion and their relationships of difference to religion played a less significant role in their lives. Although Craig, Daniel, Henry, Megan, Michael, Nick and Zoe described themselves as ‘atheist’, claiming this self-identification did not appear to involve a deep engagement with religion or theism or to stem from extended or extensive consideration of their relationship to religion. Describing themselves as atheist was often because of one or two specific problems with religion or theism that they had encountered in life, settled and recalled whilst completing their questionnaires or had only considered because asked to answer the question, ‘What is your religion?’ Their decision to self-identify as atheists might have been influenced by a negative experience in their life, such as the loss of a relative (Megan), or their objections to what was perceived as the ‘cruel’ and controlling nature of God (Craig, Katie, Zoe). But engaging with religion was often considered to be unimportant for their day-to-day lives. For example, at the time of the interview, Henry told me he had forgotten he had ticked the ‘no religion’ box on the questionnaire. He said, ‘I don’t really ever think that religion is important. I mean, if people have a religious belief or value, they can keep it, I don’t really care; it’s up to them.’ He also chose not to discuss religion with family and friends because he ‘never really found it to be an interesting subject’ and it was ‘not the kind of topic that I tend to start a conversation with.’

These participants had not received a Christian upbringing and their lesser degrees of engagement with religion or theism were partly because they did not experience any conflict with their families on matters of belief. As Michael said, ‘there’s not really much to talk about, cos we’ve both got the same views’. Similarly, when they chose to discuss religion with their friends, it was not considered to be a very important topic of conversation because they were often largely in agreement

with them. Even when these young atheists discussed religion and belief with their religious friends, it was rarely something they argued about. Sometimes, as Nick explained, this was because their religious friends might ‘believe there’s a God’ but they were ‘not majorly devoted’. When they did disagree with their ‘religious’ friends, divergences were rarely important enough for them to ‘fall-out’. For example, when Megan sometimes discussed the problem of evil and suffering with her religious friends, they often responded to her challenges by explaining that God ‘has his reasons’. But she was not interested enough in the differences between the content of these beliefs and her own to argue at length, or for the topic of religion to become a problem within her friendship group.

Alice, Beth and Laura each ticked the ‘no religion’ box for very different reasons. But each had reflected on their relationship with religion, and their connection to a religion such as Christianity (Laura) or to a non-religious world view such as atheism (Alice) or agnosticism (Beth) seemed to be more important for their lives than it was for other participants. For the majority of participants, religion and their relationships to religion did not appear to play an important part in their lives, even for those who had reflected on their relationship of difference to religion enough to describe themselves as atheists or to express atheist beliefs during our interviews. Relationships of difference to religion *were* significant, however, in the self-interpretations of both Alice and Beth. When they ticked the ‘no religion’ box, they therefore may well have intended to express the non-religious self-understandings or self-interpretations that became apparent in their interviews as non-religious self-representations or self-identifications on their questionnaires. In other words, ticking ‘no religion’ could have been an expression of non-religious identity. But it is less than clear that Laura intended to report a non-religious identity

when she reported no religion. And yet, because religion remained important in Laura's self-understanding, it is still possible to say that the act of ticking the 'no religion' box was an act of *self-identity in relation to religion*, whilst this was neither a self-evidently religious nor non-religious self-identity.

Within this diverse group, there were relatively few participants for whom constructions of religion and relationships of difference were significant within their self-understandings and in the formation of their self-identities. But there were more participants for whom constructions of religion and relationships of difference were not significant within their self-understandings and in the formation of their self-identities. Their relationships of difference to religion instead differed in strength and were more or less important to them during different moments in their lives. Their constructions of religion and their relationships of difference to religion became important when they were asked to answer questions like, 'What do you believe in?', 'What are rights and wrongs for you?', 'Can you tell me about what "religion" means to you?' and 'Can you tell me about why you ticked the "no religion" box on the questionnaire?'

8.4 Identity and the 'No Religion' Box

If non-religious identity is dependent upon *a relationship of difference to religion* being expressed *as a matter of importance* within a person's self-interpretation, then people who tick the 'no religion' box are not necessarily doing so in order to assert a form of non-religious identity. Determining whether they self-identify as non-religious might instead involve teasing out *the degrees to which* a relationship of difference to religion is *important* to them by identifying these within respondents' self-interpretations. But religious and non-religious identities are not only 'complex' because of 'the multifaceted nature of religion' – and, I would add, because of the

multiplicity of possible relationships to religion – but also, as Hemming and Madge note, ‘because the concept of identity is itself a nuanced one’ (2012:40).

There are many different ways in which ‘identity’ has been interpreted in recent decades and, for sociologists Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, the multiple and contradictory ways in which this term has been used in the social sciences and humanities mean that it now lacks validity as an ‘analytical category’. Rather than continue to make use of this ‘ambiguous’ term, they suggest alternatives that might do ‘the theoretical work “identity” is supposed to do without its confusing, contradictory connotations’ (2000:14). Two such terms are ‘identification’ and ‘categorization’, and these seem to be particularly helpful for clarifying how religious and non-religious identities might be understood in relation to censuses and questionnaires. To begin with, they draw a distinction between ‘self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others’. The former is a ‘self-understanding’ of one’s ‘situated subjectivity’, that is, ‘one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act’ (2000:17). The latter is the ‘formalised, codified, objectified systems of categorization developed by powerful, authoritative institutions’, often conducted by the modern state as it aims to ‘identify and categorize people’ through censuses and other forms of social categorisation (2000:15). Brubaker and Cooper also suggest ‘self-representation’ and ‘self-identification’ as two terms that are closely related to ‘self-understanding’ but which differ slightly in that they involve ‘at least some degree of explicit discursive articulation’ (2000:18). Moreover, they raise questions about the use of the term ‘collective identities’, which is often applied to ‘race, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, sexuality social movements and other phenomena’. Here, ‘identity’ often conveys ‘a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group

members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders'. This stands in contrast to 'more open self-understandings, involving some sense of affinity or affiliation, commonality or connectedness to particular others, but lacking a sense of overriding oneness vis-à-vis some constitutive "other"'. Rather than use 'identity' to represent such very different positions, therefore, they suggest 'commonality', which indicates shared common attribute(s); 'connectedness', which denotes the 'relational ties' between people; and, to signify 'the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group' usually associated with 'collective identity', 'groupness' (2000:19-20).

Brubaker and Cooper's critique is therefore particularly helpful for a discussion of what is meant by the term 'non-religious identity' and how this relates to the ticking of a box on a census or questionnaire. In particular, it provides more nuanced language for talking about different forms of identity and identification. The type of categorisation and the identities that are created when we complete censuses and questionnaires differ from the categorisation of others that we carry out each day and are subjected to ourselves, and our own more personal self-understandings, self-interpretations and self-identities. Furthermore, although we may feel a sense of belonging to a particular religious group, or affinity with people who share our non-religious world view, this might not be the same as wishing to claim for oneself the identity of that particular group or perspective. When Copson suggested that non-religious identities were on the rise, he might have been referring to the type of identity that is used by the state to categorise its citizens and, in addition, to a form of collective identity in which group members might share degrees of commonality, connectedness and groupness. But the question of whether the term 'non-religious' can be accurately applied either to respondents' self-representations and self-

identifications or to their self-understandings and situated subjectivities remains dependent upon the variety of relationships of difference to religion that such alternative understandings of identity display and the level of importance given to these relationships of difference by respondents themselves.

The diversity of stances and levels of engagement with religion amongst these young people suggest that it is far from obvious that their decision to report no religion equates to an expression of a non-religious identity. Brubaker and Cooper's critique of collective identities is helpful here for recognising the varying degrees to which people might identify with a particular world view. Rather than assuming that each of the participants' relationships to religion constitutes a religious or non-religious *identity*, it is more helpful to view them as reflecting different levels of *commonality* with a religion or a non-religious world view. This would allow for a distinction to be drawn between participants such as Alice, for whom an atheist self-identification played an important part in her assertion of independence from her parents, and Michael and Henry, who chose not to engage in arguments or lengthy discussions about religion with family and friends, and whose atheism appeared to play only a minor role in their self-understandings. But it could also be helpful in describing the significant differences between participants who had less clearly defined stances. Both Laura and Joanne reported negative experiences of church services and these had partly influenced their decisions to tick the 'no religion' box. However, although Laura sometimes found going to church 'a bit of a chore', her interest and engagement with arguments for the existence of God, as well as her thoughts about the value of prayer and the importance of faith in other people's lives, indicated that she had more commonality with Christianity than Joanne, whose incomprehension of religious rituals and practices, confusion over religious truth

claims and rejection of both belief and non-belief in God suggested a much more tenuous relationship to both religion and non-religion.

Conclusion

Independently making the decision to tick the ‘no religion’ box was important for many of the participants. Some identified with atheism or agnosticism and expressed atheist or agnostic beliefs, but others believed in God, and some were both uncertain about or confused by religious beliefs and uninterested or unwilling to express disbelief instead. For some participants, ‘no religion’ did not accurately reflect their relationship with religion and more precise subcategories might have helped them express themselves more clearly. For others, the ambiguous nature of this category was part of its appeal. When asked why they ticked ‘no religion’, participants said that this catch-all category provided them with the freedom not to commit to a religion at this stage in their lives, enabling them to continue to lead authentic and meaningful lives without the limitations on their thoughts and experiences that following a religion was believed to entail. The ‘no religion’ option allowed others to differentiate themselves either from what they understood by a religious identity or from the negative connotations of non-religious identities.

My research suggests that describing the act of ticking the ‘no religion’ box as an expression of non-religious identity does not adequately reflect the diversity of relationships to religion that might exist within this category. Ticking the ‘no religion’ box need not be a self-evident self-representation of non-religious identity, but a relational and bottom-up approach to researching the self-interpretations of respondents can determine the understandings of religion, the relationships of difference to religion and the significance of these relationships within the self-

understandings of those who report no religion and thereby assess the extent to which respondents are affirming a non-religious identity when they do so.

The diversity of participants' relationships to religion is further underlined in Chapter Nine, where findings from Chapters Four to Eight are brought together and discussed in relation to existing research on youth and religion, in order to argue that a shift in focus from the content to the function of belief helps us to better understand the lives of young nones.

Chapter Nine: The Function of Belief

Introduction

The young people who participated in this research live within what Taylor has described as the immanent frame of our secular age, where the order of the world is natural rather than supernatural, true reality is fully immanent rather than transcendent and the most obvious way to view things is scientific rather than religious. One cultural feature of this era is a turn to subjectivity, which has led some people in search of what Taylor regards as trivialised forms of authenticity that are based entirely on self-fulfilment. But it remains possible to lead meaningful authentic lives that are connected to those things that have significance for us. The findings from this research suggest that growing up within this context has influenced what the participants considered to be important in life, as well as what they thought about religion and belief. These two aspects of their lives also seemed to be related: their constructions of religion and their decision to report none were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance, and what they considered important in life was reflected in their beliefs about God, life after death, the supernatural and prayer.

This chapter draws together findings presented in this thesis and discusses them in relation to existing research on youth and religion and on non-religion. Each participant ticked the 'no religion' box on their questionnaires, but, by adopting strategies similar to those described in studies of young people's religious identity formation, many of them found that modified beliefs from different religious traditions were meaningful to them because of how they related to other aspects of their lives. When scholars conclude that this type of adaptation of beliefs from diverse religious traditions is incoherent and that such beliefs lack significance for

them, this assumption occurs partly because an emphasis has been placed on the importance of the content rather than the function of belief. It is therefore argued that shifting our focus from the content to the function of belief can help us to better understand the lives of young people who have no religion.

9.1 Matters of Importance

It was important for these young people to lead authentic and meaningful lives that were not constrained by others. This involved discovering and experiencing as much as possible, as well as being different and unique, but it was also dependent on the security, stability and support that came from their relationships with family and friends. Maintaining connections with the people who made up their defining communities was therefore particularly important to them. Part of ‘living life to the fullest’ (Zoe) involved enjoying their present lives and trying to ‘treasure’ each moment they had with family and friends (Daniel). However, it was also imperative that they not ‘waste’ opportunities (Alice), and so working hard at school and making progress in their hobbies and activities was also deemed to be important; it would enable them to go on to study at university and/or pursue a rewarding career that would provide them with financial security and a comfortable life. Experiences of the past were often interpreted as obstacles they had overcome and which taught them how to improve their lives. Although some of these experiences had been difficult, they played an important role in a larger narrative of self-improvement that was particularly prominent in their self-interpretations. Sometimes this was a cause for anxiety, but more often it was viewed positively since they would be rewarded with the successful future that they had anticipated.

The participants’ descriptions of what they valued and were committed to shared certain similarities with findings from recent studies within the field of youth

and religion that have sought to explore the ‘world views’, ‘faith’ and ‘spirit’ of Generation Y (Savage *et al.* 2006; Collins-Mayo *et al.* 2010; Mason *et al.* 2007; Mason 2010). Savage *et al.* coin the phrase ‘Happy Midi-Narrative’ to describe their participants’ world view:

‘Happy’ refers to the fact that central to our young people’s world view is the belief that the universe and social world are essentially benign and life is OK. Of course, the young people recognized that difficult things happen ...But they also evidenced a belief that there are enough resources within the individual and his or her family and friends to enable happiness to prevail. There was no need to explain why happiness is the goal of life – this was self-evident to our young people (2006:38).

In contrast to meta-narratives such as the Enlightenment belief in human progress or religious stories about the ultimate purpose of life, this ‘midi-narrative’ represents the world views of young people ‘that operate on a more modest scale of here and now, rather than something beyond’ (2006:38). The happy midi-narrative is not an ‘individualistic mini-narrative’. Rather, it is ‘communal on a small scale (me, my friends, and my family): a midi-narrative’ (2006:38). This was something that many of my participants shared. Many of them expressed concerns about animal welfare and environmentalism, and were also critical of different forms of exploitation and discrimination that exist within society, but they were primarily concerned with their own day-to-day lives and anticipated futures, as well as with their family and friends upon whom they depended for comfort and security. The narratives of self-improvement shared by my participants were goal-oriented and when discussing these they would sometimes state quite clearly that they did not think these were related to greater meaning or purpose to life. Nick did not think there was ‘much of a

meaning' to life, Jack told me that we were not 'here for a purpose or anything' and Alice did not think that there was 'some outer purpose besides what you decide is your purpose'. Happiness was important to participants, but only Abigail linked a quest for happiness to meaning and purpose in her life.

In this respect, the young people who took part in this study were also similar to many of the young Australians who participated in the research of Mason *et al.* (2007), who had 'no overarching vision, whether religious or secular, inspiring them and shaping their lives' (Mason 2010:57). They also shared a number of similarities with many of the young people studied by Collins-Mayo *et al.*, who observed that not being 'entirely sure of their ultimate purpose' did not 'cause the young people too many problems' (2010:73). Indeed, one of the young people involved in their research was 'quite relieved *not* to have a sense of what his ultimate purpose was as he felt it would put him under too much pressure' (2010:74). Rather than being focused on an overall purpose, or forming an overarching vision for their lives, these young people were more interested in making plans:

They were not thinking about the purpose of life in broad terms nor thinking about vocations or callings. They generally saw it as their responsibility to work out what they wanted to do with their lives and how to go about achieving those goals (2010:75).

Taking responsibility for their future lives and making plans to achieve goals formed an important part in my participants' narratives of continual self-improvement. They also spoke of their enjoyment of hobbies and activities that allowed them to measure their progress. It was important to have 'goals and something to work towards' (Alice) in many areas of life and, for some, making detailed plans for the future and achieving their carefully considered aims, were in themselves important elements of

what they considered to be the purpose of their lives. William thought that ‘getting a good job that you can look forward to’ made his life ‘purposeful’. He thought that this meant that if something went wrong in his life, there was ‘something else still there’ and that he could ‘look forward to something’ and that this would provide him with ‘a good purpose to live for’. Making plans for the future also helped them to feel independent and, for some participants, such as Rachel and Zoe who had both been let down by close family members in the past, constructing carefully thought through backup plans helped provide them with security and reassurance because of their belief and trust in themselves, which, as Abigail explained, was ‘the only certainty you’ve got’.

Self-belief was also something that was expressed by the young people involved in the research of Collins-Mayo *et al.* (2010). An important part of making plans and achieving goals was being able to ‘believe and trust in themselves’, and this ‘required self-knowledge, authenticity and a degree of self-realization’. As they ‘did not like being told what to do’, they ‘demonstrated faith in their self’ through ‘autonomous decision-making’ (2010:37). The importance of living autonomously and authentically by being true to and having faith in themselves was central to my participants’ beliefs about the need for freedom as well as continual self-improvement grounded in self-reliance. Although their pursuit for autonomy and freedom sometimes appeared to be an end in itself, as illustrated by their desire not to be ‘limited by anything’ (Martha), and the importance of not ‘having to follow what someone says’ (Henry) and ‘doing something that you want to do and not taking orders from someone’ (Katie), they were also aware of the need for restrictions in order to live more authentically, which Abigail described as the need for ‘freedom

within reason'. Often this was because they recognised the importance of empathising and forming strong relationships with others.

In addition to revisiting the concept of the happy midi-narrative from Savage *et al.*, Collins-Mayo *et al.* introduce the notion of 'immanent faith', which they describe as a 'this-worldly faith' in the "secular trinity" of family, friends and the reflexive self' (2010:32). For their participants, putting trust in their families and friends was perhaps the most important aspect of this faith. They write: '[t]he importance of family and close friends to our young people, whether they were churchgoers or not, was unmistakable' (2010:33). Central to their participants' faith in this trinity was trust. This was also true for the young people who participated in my research, for whom family and friends provided the support to be confident enough to express themselves in singing competitions (Katie) or to follow a particular fashion that was criticised by their peers (Martha). It offered Karl, for example, the security to test boundaries by secretly leaving home to visit friends in Liverpool because 'you only live once', confident in the knowledge that his family would help him if (when) he got into trouble. Trust was not only an important element in their relationships with family and friends (Ellie, Henry, Joanne, Laura, Megan, William) but also with their pets (Alice, David, Leah), with fellow Scouts (Ben) and with the social workers and other support staff in their lives (Rachel).

Collins-Mayo *et al.* also illustrate how young people's immanent faith 'can be threatened and disrupted by discontinuities in intimate relationships'. But this 'did not mean that faith disappears'. Rather, 'just as with religious faith, it becomes selectively renegotiated'. They write:

Our young people were, and had to be, quite adept at developing their own networks of trust, drawing on selected members of the extended family when

the immediate family was not up to the task ...we could say that young people constructed an elective fraternity drawing upon existing family structures as well as peer relations (2010:36).

The young people who participated in my research were similarly resourceful in constructing what Nick referred to as surrogate families from friends and/or more distant relations. While they would often find that their needs were met by their parents, they also recognised that the closeness of these relationships did not always help them when they were experiencing difficulties, which would mean that turning to other family members or friends was sometimes seen to be more beneficial. For example, Megan's experience of being bullied meant that she would sometimes find it more helpful to share her feelings with her grandfather or young cousin, as both of them had also been bullied and were therefore thought to be more empathetic or better listeners than immediate family members. This was also true for Ellie, whose feelings about a family crisis were more readily shared with a close friend who had similar experiences than with her mother who was too closely involved in the situation.

The importance participants placed on being themselves, on being free to be different and unique, as well as on their need to maintain important connections with others, also influenced their constructions of religion and their decisions to report none. But these matters of importance also influenced how they appropriated and adapted certain beliefs about life after death and prayer from religious traditions.

9.2 Problems with Religion

Some studies of youth and religion appear to emphasise the importance of propositional beliefs in their research into young people's understanding and experience of religion. In quantitative studies where large numbers of people are

questioned about religion and belief, it is often necessary to make use of propositional statements to gain knowledge about respondents. So, for example, we can learn from religion scholar William Kay and religious educator Leslie Francis' (1995) study that, among 16,411 young people aged between 13-15 in England and Wales, 24% 'clearly denies a belief in God' (1995:5). These pupils were 'designated' 'atheists' if they 'disagreed' with the statement 'I believe in God' (1995:8). Similar findings about young people's beliefs are reported in Madge, Hemming and Kevin Stenson's (2014) study of young people's religious identities. In order to learn more about the religious identities of young people from schools and colleges in three multi-faith locations in England, 10,500 students were asked to respond to statements of belief. With the exception of Buddhist and Jewish students, belief in God was of central importance for the young people who identified as belonging to one of the other main religious traditions. Their survey data, along with data from discussion groups and interviews with 157 young people, suggested that 'believing in God' was 'the main goal of religion' and, for many young people, it was 'more important than public worship' (2014:100). This leads them to conclude that, amongst their informants, 'believing without belonging is much more common than belonging without believing' (2014:120). These two studies suggest that, when young people are presented with statements of belief about the existence of God, many of those who are part of a theistic religious tradition affirm these beliefs and consider them to be of central importance to their religious life, whereas those who are not deny such beliefs. But this does not tell us anything about how young people's beliefs and disbeliefs function in their lives.

Madge *et al.* also observe that part of the reason some young people chose to identify as having no religion is that they 'found it [religion] hard to believe', with

one participant informing them that this was because of the ‘flaws’ in religion and the fact that ‘there’s not one that seems to explain everything’ (2014:102). In common with these young people, many of the participants in this study similarly emphasised the centrality of belief in their constructions of religion, dismissing religion and religious beliefs because of a lack of evidence for their truth (Alice, Ben, Craig, Ellie, Henry, Karl, Katie, Michael, Megan, Nick). This understanding of religion and belief was partly informed by what they learnt at school, as well as from their parents and the media. The majority of participants expressed the common view that religion was concerned primarily with metaphysical beliefs about God and remained unconvinced or uninterested in the philosophical arguments for the existence of God that they had learnt in RE. They also thought that science was a superior theory that provided better explanations of the world than religion.

However, a lack of evidence for religion was not the only reason participants reported none. By asking them about their wider lives, it becomes apparent that their constructions of religion and their decision to report none were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance. For example, whilst participants stressed the importance of their own authority in determining how to live authentically, religion was seen as an external authority placing limitations on one’s freedom. The impact that following a religion might have on one’s freedom to choose how to live and act and, in particular, one’s ability to enjoy life, was frequently expressed by these young people (Abigail, Alice, Ellie, Henry, Karl, Stacey), especially as it was often imagined that religious people were unable to deviate from their religion’s moral codes (Stacey, Rachel, Leah). They perceived God as a controlling force that they did not want to have in their lives (Katie, Rachel, Zoe). But belief in God was also considered to be incompatible with the importance

they placed on helping others, opposing various forms of discrimination and exploitation, caring for the environment and supporting animal welfare (Alice, Craig, Daniel, Leah, Martha, Megan, Rachel). God was cruel because he did not alleviate the suffering in the world (Craig, Daniel, Megan).

In believing in the importance of their own authenticity and authority, these young people of no religion differed significantly from some of their contemporaries who have participated in recent studies of youth and religion. For example, religious educator Julia Ipgrave's forthcoming study of Muslim pupils from schools in inner city Birmingham illustrates how for many of her participants, as well as providing an 'overarching framework' for their lives that gave them 'ontological security', an important part of their faith was the belief that God was 'the ultimate source of authority'. They would therefore express an 'acceptance of authority as part of the self rather than denial of self'. In this, Ipgrave notes, they differed 'from the understanding of some young people interviewed in other schools who found objectionable the idea of religiously-imposed commands that restrict free exercise of our own reason and judgement' (forthcoming, n.p.). This understanding of religion as restrictive is much closer to that expressed by the young people of no religion who participated in this research.

9.3 The Significance of 'No Religion'

Being free to be themselves without being limited by others remained a significant part of the reason that the 'no religion' category was more appealing than what participants thought a religious, and sometimes even a non-religious identity, would entail. Some social scientists have argued that greater understanding of the diversity of census and survey 'nones' could be achieved if subcategories such as 'atheist' or 'agnostic' were included as options from which to choose (Vernon 1968:229; Baker

& Smith 2009:720). However, ticking this box on a questionnaire is not necessarily to claim an identity of a particular group, perspective or belief. And this, it could be argued, is part of the appeal of this generic category over other more specific categories that denote particular non-religious stances and identities. My research indicates that a number of participants valued the category of ‘no religion’, as it allowed them to differentiate themselves both from specific religions and religious identities and from non-religious labels, such as ‘atheist’, with which they equally did not wish to be associated.

In her recent research on ‘generic “not religious” categories and populations’ on censuses and surveys, Lee draws similar conclusions about the ‘no religion’ category (2014:466). She illustrates through the responses of some of her participants – non-religious adults in the south-east of England – how people sometimes prefer to adopt more general categories to describe their relationship to religion. Rather than viewing generic non-religious categories as too broad and, therefore, imprecise (Campbell 2013[1971]; Pasquale 2007), Lee argues that ‘these categories sometimes measure specific first-order identifications’. Although ‘some survey designers have sought to replace general categories with ones they consider to be emic such as “atheist” or “humanist”’, she concludes that ‘apparently generic categories might in fact have the same emic validity themselves’ (2014:473). Qualitative research with participants like my own can help illustrate how ‘people might have been moved to choose “no religion” for a positive reason’ (2014:481).

For some young people, negative experiences of religion as well as indifference influenced their decision to choose this category (Joanne, Megan, Nick). For others, being free to choose which box to tick was important because they had reached an age when they could decide matters of belief for themselves, even if other

influential people in their lives might make different choices (Daniel). Some thought they were not religious enough to identify with a religious tradition thought to require commitment and devotion (David, Laura). But preference for the more generic category of ‘no religion’ was also implied when participants perceived non-religious identities like ‘atheist’ negatively (Ellie, Leah). Further, having no religion was considered by some young people to be a potentially temporary self-identification, chosen because they did not wish to commit to a religious tradition at this stage in their lives as young people (Abigail, Henry, Laura), and the flexibility, freedom and potentially temporary nature of the ‘no religion’ category differed from what some of them considered to be the more permanent, limited and restrictive status of a religious identity (Martha, Rachel, Stacey).

As well as having different reasons for reporting no religion, the significance of having no religion varied within participants’ self-interpretations and self-identities. For Joanne, who felt confused about biblical stories and her experience of Christianity, and appeared to express indifference about both belief and disbelief in God, religion seemed to be of little significance for her life. But if one’s identity is shaped by what one considers to be important, as Taylor suggests, then non-religious identity is dependent upon a relationship of difference to religion being expressed as a matter of importance within a person’s self-interpretation. This was therefore true for Alice and Beth but not for Laura. While *religion* played an important part in the formation of each of their self-identities – which were all, therefore, self-identities *in relation to religion* – Laura’s more ambiguous relationship to religion meant that hers was neither a self-evidently religious or non-religious self-identity. It is not possible, therefore, to argue – as Copson did – that everyone who ticks the ‘no religion’ box on a questionnaire is necessarily doing so in order to assert a form of

non-religious identity. The question of how reporting no religion relates to identity is more complex than this. It depends upon the extent to which participants' constructions of religion and relationships of difference to such constructions appear to be *significant* or *insignificant* in the self-interpretations of those who tick this box.

Copson also claimed that those who report no religion might lead their lives 'without reference to religion' (BHA 2012). Since many of the participants in this research held a variety of beliefs associated with life after death, the supernatural and prayer that they had adapted from different religious traditions, it might seem that these young nones do *not* live their lives without reference to religion. But this question is similarly more complex than it first appears, because these participants considered such beliefs to *differ from* those they associated with religion. Given that non-religious identity requires engagement with religion, it is possible to conclude that those who claim such identities for themselves do *not* live their lives without reference to religion. While only Alice and Beth expressed non-religious self-identities, the significance that Alice, Beth and Laura all placed on religion in their self-understandings indicates that all three did *not* live their lives without reference to religion. But, by differentiating God, the afterlife, and other supernatural beliefs from religion, the other participants *can* be said to live their lives without reference to *their constructions of* religion. These beliefs held more relevance to and significance for their everyday lives because they were more closely related to matters of importance than religion was.

9.4 The Coherence of Belief

The majority of participants attached their own value to religious concepts such as heaven, which helped reassure them that they were able to maintain connections with loved ones who had died or that they would be able to remain connected with people

they loved when they themselves died. By reconfiguring the religious meanings of concepts such as purgatory and reincarnation, they also felt assured that there could be more opportunities after they died to correct past mistakes. Praying to God was also important to some participants at particularly distressing periods in their lives. A number of scholars consider beliefs about life after death or the supernatural that have been adapted from diverse religious traditions and folk religion to be incoherent and to lack significance for the lives of the individuals who hold them. But by emphasising problems with the content of these beliefs, as expressed in surveys and interviews, researchers may miss the important ways that they function in people's lives.

Meredith B. McGuire's study of 'lived religion', which explored how 'religion and spirituality are practised, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people' (2008:12), raises a number of important questions about the need for coherence, and can be applied to empirical studies of the 'fuzzy' beliefs people hold about life after death and the supernatural (Voas 2009). Rather than dismissing what might appear from the outside as incoherent religious beliefs and practices, McGuire asks her readers to consider the following question:

What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important? (2008:4).

She notes that '[m]any scholars of religion have assumed that individuals practice a single religion, exclusive of other religious options', which often leads to misplaced assumptions about 'how adherents *ought* to be committed and about what consonance *ought* to exist between individuals' beliefs and practices and the

proclaimed teachings of their chosen religion' (2008:11). McGuire also emphasises the importance of recognising that 'at the individual level, religion is not fixed, unitary or even coherent'. Rather, individuals' 'religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing' (2008:12). These changes and adaptations may result in what might look like a lack of coherence to some observers, but, she argues, we might be 'mistaken in our expectations of cognitive consistency between individuals' religion, as institutionally framed, and a person's actual religion, as lived' (2008:15). Furthermore, perhaps 'only a small and unrepresentative proportion struggle to achieve tight consistency among their wide-ranging beliefs, perceptions, experiences, values, practices, and actions' (2008:16). McGuire's study helps us to rethink some of the problematic assumptions that scholars make about the religious lives of individuals. Although she is primarily concerned with religious practitioners, accepting that other kinds of beliefs can also be messy and contradictory might help us to move away from assumptions about the incoherent nature of the content of beliefs to proper consideration of how beliefs serve an important function in people's everyday lives.

The related assumption that the content of propositional beliefs is central to people's religious lives can also be detected in the methods that some researchers use for enquiring about religion and belief. Day and Lynch criticise the approach taken by Smith and Denton in their study of the religious and spiritual lives of American youth, but their objections could be applied to other studies as well. For Day and Lynch, 'belief in the religious lives of young people today takes a much wider range of forms than this' (2013:200), and this might also be true for people who have chosen to report having no religion. Day's (2011) research on belief and identity with

people living in the north of England included interviews with participants who described themselves as ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic’ but who also expressed beliefs in the supernatural and life after death.³⁰ A number of her participants described encounters with ghosts, many of which were what Day terms ‘after-death relational experiences’ (2011:103). She concludes that, during their interviews, her ‘informants were creating and sustaining beliefs by performing those beliefs through the telling’, thereby ‘reinforcing their desire for a continuing relationship’ (2011:107-8). Rather than focusing on what might seem to be the irrational or contradictory nature of non-religious participants’ beliefs about life after death and the supernatural, Day’s research highlights the importance of understanding how such beliefs enable individuals to maintain relationships with their loved ones, which strengthens their sense of belonging and therefore has more relevance for their day-to-day lives than theistic religious beliefs.

This focus on the function of beliefs in people’s lives is also evident in the research Collins-Mayo *et al.* (2010) conducted into participants’ immanent faith. ‘Death and what happens after we dies’, they write, ‘was a recurrent theme brought up by the young people’ (2010:41). Following sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Leger’s notion of religion as a ‘chain of memory’, the authors note that ghosts are important because ‘they provide continuity between the living and the dead’. They conclude that, ‘in the absence of a Christian chain of memory, ghosts can provide a local family-centric chain that keeps the memory of the person alive and as such sustains immanent faith’ (2010:44).

³⁰ Many definitions of atheism or agnosticism (Martin 2007; Bullivant 2008) are simply concerned with belief in God and do not preclude belief in the supernatural or life after death.

Like the young people described by Collins-Mayo *et al.* (2010), many of the young nones who took part in this study also believed in an afterlife and the supernatural, and these beliefs became more significant for their day-to-day lives than their constructions of religion because of how they were related to their relationships with people they loved. As Day and Lynch argue:

...belief narratives often serve less as a means of communicating propositional content than as a way in which people express a sense of a bond with others who are taken to be important sources of support, guidance, and affiliation (2013:201).

Focusing solely on the incoherent content of these beliefs, the inconsistency with which individuals hold such beliefs, or how these beliefs differ from the religious traditions that inspired them, obscures their significance for young people's lives. In order to understand the significance beliefs about God, the afterlife or the supernatural hold for these young people, this study has demonstrated how it is necessary to understand more about their lives as young people alongside their constructions of religion and their thoughts about and experiences of having none. For participants, the importance of self-improvement and correcting past mistakes, the continuation of relationships that provide stability and security, as well as the significance of being part of a larger narrative of life on earth, all related to the beliefs they held about life, the end of life, life after death, the supernatural and prayer. Through an exploration of what participants thought was important to them, it becomes easier to begin to see how modified religious concepts and practices, as well as beliefs more generally, function for these young people.

9.5 The Function of Belief

The young people who participated in this research did not always conceive of belief as propositional, explanatory, and necessarily related to religion, nor did they only discuss the *content* of beliefs. Some of the participants were also interested in how beliefs *functioned* in people's lives. Recognising the distinction between 'belief in' and 'belief that', belief for them could be something closer to 'trust' or 'having faith in' and 'believing in', than the acceptance of propositional beliefs about a true state of affairs. As they were less concerned about the content of beliefs and more interested in the effect holding such beliefs had on their own lives, or those of religious adherents, these young people were also less concerned about the veracity of such beliefs. Some therefore held the function of belief in general and not just of religious belief to be important in their lives.

Although belief in God was unusual amongst participants in this study, there were a number of young people who recognised that a sense of emotional and existential reassurance was an important part of how religion functioned for those who believed in it. However, such a function was often perceived to be a psychological crutch which they could themselves do without. Nick thought that Christians were in need of the support of 'God as a father' who 'helps them with their lives'. However, as he felt perfectly content with the love and support he received from his family and friends, there was no need to rely on any other source of help, especially one that did not have enough evidence to support its existence. Ellie also thought that religion could comfort and console, but felt that this function was contingent upon holding metaphysical religious beliefs which she herself did not hold. Although religion was 'something to make people feel safer' and 'help them to live their life', she did not think there was 'any point in dedicating yourself to

something that you don't believe in'. Henry agreed that religion could bring a sense of peace and tranquillity during difficult times or provide comfort and company during lonely moments. Communication with a caring God could help a religious person to 'feel calm', which was, he thought, the 'reason they have Bibles and stuff in hotels'. David too talked about the way religion could function to soothe and reassure. Like other participants, he said, 'I'm not a Christian; I'm not that much of a believer'. Unlike many of them, however, he believed in God, as well as heaven, hell and reincarnation. When I asked him to tell me more about how his belief in God affected the way he lived his life, he said, it was comforting to know at times when 'you think you're alone' that 'you're not'. His belief in God functioned much like other things in his life that keep 'company' with him.

In discussing the function of religion, the content of religious belief remained important for all the above participants. Those who did not believe in religion thought that it was only by accepting the *content* of religious beliefs that religion could *function* as a source of comfort in troubling times. Some of the young people felt that this source was unnecessary because they were able to receive what they considered to be a similar support and solace from their families and friends; for others who ticked 'no religion', like David, metaphysical religious beliefs *were* a necessary source of comfort. For all these young people, however, the function that religion fulfilled was dependent upon religious belief and, therefore, not available to those who did not believe. But for other participants, a different stance appeared to often be taken towards religious beliefs in which the function of religion was not dependent on assent to the content of religious belief. While most of the young people of 'no religion' viewed religious belief as consisting of 'belief that' statements that were either true or false, there were some participants who questioned

whether it was necessary for certain beliefs to be empirically true in order for them to be of functional value to their lives. For these participants, religious beliefs and other types of metaphysical belief were considered to be interesting and made life more enjoyable. The personal significance some of these religious beliefs had led them to also reject scientific claims that appeared to contradict what they believed was to be more appealing, exciting, meaningful and significant in their lives.

Beth appeared to be more interested in the function than the content of people's beliefs. She was also more willing than most to accept the value of religion, recognising that it enabled people to enjoy life without then remarking that people should learn to enjoy life without it. Rather than dismiss religious beliefs, part of Beth's experience of having 'no religion' involved remaining open to the possibility that 'there could be a God' and that 'any religion could be right'. However, the truth or falsity of the content of beliefs was not the only way belief should be understood. She thought that metaphysical beliefs about an all-loving God and an afterlife were necessary for some people to make life more bearable. Although this type of belief differed from her own about 'fantasy things', in both cases, such beliefs enriched life, and were, she thought, how human beings coped with the uncertainties of their existence: 'we'll always be looking for answers for stuff that we don't know and if we can't find the answer, we'll just make up something that will fit along the lines.' This understanding of belief as made up to fit allowed Beth to maintain her personal beliefs in ghosts, aliens, and the characters from fantasy fiction. For religious adherents, belief in an afterlife was important because it was 'hard for someone to accept that once you're dead you just stop'; it was therefore necessary for people to 'think of ways to get around that'. It did not seem to matter whether such beliefs

were true because, if by holding them ‘you know that it’s not going to end so hard’, then this would ultimately ‘make life better’.

As she thought that a religion was ‘something you’re devoted to and you believe in’, she did not think what she believed in could be ‘classified as a religion’. The main difference, she thought, between her beliefs and those of a religious adherent, was that the purpose of religious beliefs was to help people cope with ultimate questions of existence and, at her stage in life, this was less important than beliefs about the supernatural, which simply made life ‘more interesting’ and ‘more fun’:

I just think that people have religion so that they don’t think that their life is kind of pointless. And people don’t like thinking that they don’t have the answers, so they will make stories and people will believe them, and I don’t know if they’re true or not, so I don’t know what to believe in and I think it’s great that people do make stories and believe in these things cos it just makes life better.

Although, when asked what she believed in, Martha said, ‘I was christened so I suppose I’m Christian’, she went on to say that ‘there’s another type of thing which is like Wiccan... *It’s not being a witch*, to clarify that! [Laughs]’. She described Wicca as ‘like a belief which branches off, so you can accept other things as well, you know, so it’s not a very serious one.’ Wicca appealed not only because of her love of nature and her desire to help and protect animals, but also because she believed that its focus on ‘the way that things work and life cycles’ meant that it was ‘very much based on real things’ and therefore more believable. However, unlike many participants, she did not think it was important for her beliefs to be supported by scientific ‘evidence’ or ‘proof’. In fact, she thought that in the area of religion and

belief, there was a lot that science could not explain and that scientists remained ‘baffled’ by. She did not know ‘whether there is a God or not ... cos there’s no proof either way’, but thought that, although ‘people say it’s scientifically impossible’, it was ‘not the first time science has got it wrong’. Martha’s doubts over scientific refutations of paranormal occurrences and theistic beliefs were important for her experience of having ‘no religion’. But she also believed that, without these supernatural phenomena, life would be ‘boring’. Although she did not have a religion, she thought it was important to have a belief in something ‘that isn’t just your ordinary everyday yada, yada, yada’, which could be tedious and dull. Wicca provided this – regardless of whether it proved true or false.

In emphasising the importance of believing in something regardless of whether it is empirically verifiable, these two participants differed from the majority of young people who participated in this research.

9.6 Religion beyond Belief and Disbelief

The distinction between the content and function of religious beliefs was made by the sociologist of religion Robert Bellah (1964), who ‘distinguished belief in “propositions” from belief as a way for humans to derive comfort and meaning’ (Day 2011:22). In a later essay on the function of the idea of transcendence in contemporary culture, Bellah observed that metaphysical arguments based on ‘proofs or revelation’ are no longer ‘very compelling’. Although they can still be viewed as ‘interesting’ and ‘illuminating’, the function rather than the substance of claims about the transcendent may be more so. The essay therefore explores how religious concepts and symbols function in the lives of modern people when the content of these is perhaps no longer believed to be true. To illustrate his argument, he notes that it is perfectly possible to accept the concept of ‘original sin’ as ‘an essential

perspective on human nature without at all believing Augustine's involved bio-theological argument' (1970:196). Drawing on the work of modernist poet Wallace Stevens, Bellah argues that it is only through symbolism and consideration of 'symbols that transcend individual and society' that we can attempt to 'grasp reality as a whole'. As human beings 'we can only think in symbols, only make sense of any experience in symbols', and religious symbolism plays an essential role in our experience of being human: 'Without it man would not be human. We believe in it seriously, we believe in it willingly, we believe in it, if we follow Stevens, knowing it to be a fiction' (1970:202-3). For Bellah, believing in symbols that we know to be a fiction better characterises the nature of religion today than the affirmation of propositional beliefs.

A similar argument about the importance of the function of religious beliefs is made by the psychologist David M. Wulff, who proposes that, although today 'belief' is widely thought to consist of 'two essential components' – 'an object' and 'an attitude toward that object' – there is more to it than the acceptance or denial of an object's existence (1999:7). As well as this belief-disbelief dichotomy, there is a third realm of 'imagined objects that are known not to be real in a literal sense but that nonetheless possess vivid reality feeling'. Wulff describes this space as 'an intermediate area of experience' (1999:8). He writes:

Represented in childhood by 'transitional objects' such as the child's beloved blanket or teddy bear and in adulthood by that vast realm of transitional phenomena that constitute human culture, this creative, illusional intermediate area of experience is said to be required by all of us in order to make ourselves at home in this world, to find pattern and meaning in the totality of our experience (1999:8).

According to Wulff, in this space of creative illusions one ‘neither believes nor disbelieves’ (1999:9). Rather, this is a realm of ‘complex cognitive and emotional attitudes that include imaginative participation in, solemn appreciation for, or deep engagement with the religious object’ (1999:1). However, for many westerners, the ‘tenacious’ dichotomy of ‘belief-disbelief’ means that believing in something that they do not believe to be literally true is difficult. This in turn means that this intermediate space is ‘vulnerable’ because we are ‘inclined to believe or disbelieve in a quite literal way’ (1999:8). During time spent in India, however, Wulff encountered many Hindus who were more capable of ‘believing in’ – that is, participating in – something ‘without requiring that it be literally true’. He writes:

I remember being deeply impressed by certain highly educated Hindus who, while hardly literal believers in the Hindu pantheon, could still be profoundly moved by the kirtan, the dramatic musical performances that typically recount the emotionally complex and sometimes humorous adventures of Radha and Krishna... The possibility of becoming deeply engaged in religious content without literally believing in it would be enormously emancipating for many in the West (1999:9).

As Collins-Mayo *et al.* (2010), Day (2011), and Day and Lynch (2013) have argued, it is important to recognise the difference between the content and function of religious belief. Equally important, as Wulff (1999) suggests, is the ability to engage in a creative cultural realm that includes religion and that exists in a vulnerable position between both belief and disbelief. Examining how people might engage in religious content without literally believing or disbelieving it can further deepen our understanding of religion and religious and other non-literal beliefs. Although this function of religion, belief, fantasy and fiction was something that both Beth and

Martha were aware of, the majority of participants felt that the content of religious beliefs were too fanciful. While they should be believed literally, religious beliefs could not be, and so were to be disbelieved literally.

In common with other research within the field of youth and religion, this study has demonstrated that many of the participants construct religion as primarily concerned with metaphysical beliefs of a propositional nature. In viewing religion in this way, participants shared perspectives similar to some of the young people who spoke to Collins-Mayo *et al.*, for whom, ‘propositional beliefs tended to be judged in the first instance on the basis of objective “evidence” or “proof”’ (2010:63). But it is perhaps not surprising for young people to think of it in this way when they are asked to share their opinions about the content of propositional statements of belief in questionnaires or interviews, which can reinforce the view that assent to such beliefs is necessarily of central importance to religion. However, by being invited to share their self-interpretations and self-identities through talking about what was important to them, some of the young people who ticked ‘no religion’ differentiated between the truth content of religious beliefs and the way they function in practice – sometimes beyond either literal belief or literal disbelief.

Conclusion

For the young people of no religion who participated in this research, it was important to be free to be different and unique, as well as to maintain connections with their defining communities. Stories about the past and the future influenced their perceptions of the present and shaped their self-interpretations. Of particular significance was the narrative of self-improvement, which impacted upon what they thought about their present and how they prepared for their futures. These aspects of their lives also influenced what they thought about religion. As religion was mostly

concerned with belief in a God for whom there was not enough evidence, but who also appeared cruel and controlling, following a religion was thought to contradict or at least limit their knowledge of the world and to restrict their freedom to pursue and achieve happiness and their ability to experience life fully. For some young people, the flexibility and freedom that came with having and reporting no religion differed from the rigidity and restrictiveness they felt a religious identity entailed. For others, the generic category of 'no religion' was preferable to the negative connotations a non-religious identity such as 'atheist' held for them.

When participants spoke about belief, they were often concerned with the content of these beliefs and this meant that many religious beliefs were dismissed as fanciful. However, participants also held beliefs about life, the end of life, life after death, the supernatural and prayer, some of which they had adapted from different religious traditions. By focusing on their relationships of difference to religion, it was possible to see how, although they differentiated themselves from certain constructions of religion by reporting that they had none, they continued to value beliefs that they had adapted from religious traditions that reflected matters of importance. The beliefs had the important function of helping them maintain connections with people they loved and sustain hopes for more opportunities to experience life or correct past mistakes. Although some researchers have argued that such beliefs are incoherent and lack salience, examining how beliefs function rather than the coherence of their content or the consistency with which they are held illuminates why these beliefs remain significant for those who hold them, including for those who also report no religion.

The implications of these findings for the study of youth, religion and non-religion, as well as for the study of religion and belief in schools, are considered in more detail in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

Introduction

This research stemmed from my experiences of being both an RE teacher and a postgraduate student of religion. I had encountered pupils who were uninterested in studying religion because they were not religious but, while I identified as having no religion myself, I remained interested in the study of religious traditions and the beliefs, behaviours and belongings associated with them. I felt that, while approaches to the study of religion at tertiary rather than secondary education levels worked with broader conceptions and understandings of religion, the philosophical turn in recent RE policy and practice had in part reduced this subject to the critical assessment of religious beliefs as truth claims. To be clear, my underlying concern in exploring these topics further was not to determine how alternative understandings of religion within the RE classroom could convert non-religious pupils who identified as atheist or agnostic but, rather, to learn more about the lives of young people of no religion, in their own right and in relation to youth, religion and non-religion studies. This of course included understanding their constructions of religion, given the relational nature of the concept of non-religion, but it also involved examining the adaptation and function of belief in their lives and this aspect of the research has implications for RE, as well.

Beginning with a summary of findings from this thesis, this Conclusion reflects upon the implications of this study for future academic research. But suggestions are also made for alternative approaches to studying religion and belief in secondary schools.

Thesis Summary

This thesis explored what was important in life for 23 young nones – young people who reported no religion. Rather than solely examining their understandings of religion and their reasons for having none, my research sought to understand what they considered to be important in life in order to better understand the various relationships of difference they had to religion. The 14- and 15-year-olds who ticked the ‘no religion’ box on a short questionnaire were invited to take photographs to represent matters of importance to them. This helped them to prepare for their interviews and enabled them to begin our conversations confidently by discussing aspects of their lives on which they were experts before we addressed potentially less familiar questions of value, meaning and purpose, or religion and belief. It is hoped that by incorporating the photo-elicitation method I gained greater access to, and a fuller understanding of, the lives of my participants without unduly privileging their perspectives on religion.

What participants considered important in life and their constructions of religion were related. Although they emphasised the importance of being themselves and being free, and sometimes appeared to value their personal freedom over the concerns of others, it was also important to form strong connections in their relationships with their family and friends. They did not express a need for a single overarching secular or religious framework in which to orient their lives, but this did not mean that they were lacking meaning and purpose, and what they valued, were committed to, and formed attachments with, helped them to lead meaningful, purposeful and authentic lives. When discussing what was important, participants would often describe both the influence of past experiences and the impact of their imagined futures on their values and commitments. Drawing together events,

individuals and ideas from their experiences of the past and their anticipated futures, they constructed narratives which helped to make sense of their lives in the present. Stories about positive past experiences, not repeating mistakes, and building a good life in the future were all important, but of particular significance was the narrative of self-improvement, which appeared to affect how they perceived their pasts, how they occupied their time in the present, and what worried or excited them about their futures.

Participants' constructions of religion and their decisions to report none were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance. They often shared a common view of religion as consisting of private and individualised propositional beliefs of a metaphysical or ethical nature, which lacked enough empirical evidence to be credible or were considered to be too restrictive. Because it was important for them to be free to make their own decisions in life, to discover and learn about the world and experience as much as possible, and to lead authentic and meaningful lives in which they depended on themselves and their families and friends, constructions of religion as primarily concerned with metaphysical and ethical beliefs were of little significance in their lives. However, participants also adapted beliefs and concepts from religious traditions that complemented their sense of what was important to them. Their beliefs about God, life after death, the supernatural and prayer were understood to be *different from* those that were central to their constructions of religion. These beliefs, as well as other beliefs about life and the end of life, reflected the significance they placed on self-improvement and correcting past mistakes, the continuation of relationships that provide stability and security, and the significance of life itself. Understanding more about participants' lives as young people, their constructions of religion and their thoughts about and experiences of having none

therefore explains the apparent inconsistency of reporting no religion whilst holding beliefs adapted from religious traditions. The significance of these beliefs can be better understood when we focus on their function in participants' lives, rather than focusing on the incoherent content of these beliefs or the inconsistency with which they were held.

Further, while reporting no religion indicates that these young people do not associate themselves with religion (Cragun & Hammer 2011) or differentiate themselves from religion (Lee 2012a), this was not necessarily in itself an identity claim. And this was part of the appeal of this generic category over other more specific categories that denote particular non-religious stances and identities. For many, it allowed them to express their difference both from specific religions and religious identities and from non-religious identities such as 'atheist' with which they equally did not wish to be associated. While most participants could be said to live their lives without reference to (their constructions of) religion, which only became more or less important at certain times in their lives, for some, religion and their relationships of difference to religion were more significant, such that they could be said to live their lives *with* reference to religion. However, the extent to which participants expressed non-religious *identities* was best understood by determining the extent to which a relationship of difference to religion was significant within their self-interpretations. For the majority of participants, non-theistic stances and relationships of difference to religion were not of central importance in the self-interpretations that they shared with me, and very few should be categorised as having non-religious identities.

Implications for Studies of Youth and (Non-)Religion

The diversity and complexity of research participants' relationships to religion suggests that this is an important area for future studies of youth and non-religion. As demonstrated by this thesis, a relational, bottom-up approach to the study of non-religion provides a useful methodology for studies in this emerging field. Exploring participants' relationships of difference to religion enables us to see how people who have no religion continue to find value and meaning in certain beliefs and concepts that have been adapted from religious traditions. Combining an exploration of the young people's wider lives with a focus on their relationships of difference to religion enabled me to discern the significance of beliefs, concepts and practices that were adapted from different religious traditions and how these functioned in their lives. But a focus on the participants' relationships of difference also enables us to move beyond assumptions about what is meant when someone chooses to report no religion in order to recognise the diversity of perspectives within this category. I therefore echo Quack's call for more bottom-up qualitative studies and advocate his relational approach for future studies of young people of no religion.

Key to such an approach is the identification of participants' constructions of and relationships to religion. However, a central argument of this thesis has been that, in order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's constructions of religion and, importantly, of how belief functions for them, it is also imperative to learn more about their wider lives. The photo-elicitation method was incorporated into the research design in order to generate richer data by helping participants to prepare for their interviews and by shifting the power dynamic in the interview setting. In particular, it meant that participants could begin the interviews confidently through an open question about what was important in life and about photographs on

which they were the experts. The young people often began their interviews by sharing stories that provided valuable insights that may well not have been shared had I chosen to conduct solely verbal interviews. Providing space in interviews for participants to share such narratives is important for the study of young people's lives and could be developed further in future studies of youth and (non-)religion. This might be particularly helpful for exploring the significance of an overarching framework of meaning in young people's lives.

Some of the conclusions drawn by researchers in youth and religion studies imply both that religion is primarily a source of meaning and purpose, that young people undertake a search for these things and that, if they do not find meaning and purpose in religion, they must find these things elsewhere. Some also appear to lament that many young people have, therefore, 'no overarching vision, whether religious or secular, inspiring them and shaping their lives' (Mason 2010:57). But the emphasis placed on belief, meaning and purpose by researchers perhaps reveals more about them than their participants: 'assent to metaphysical or existential beliefs may play a relatively unimportant role in the day-to-day conduct of many young people's lives' (Lynch 2010:38). Therefore, I sought to explore what emerged as of central importance to participants' lives. I asked participants to photograph phenomena to which they attached significance and, in telling me about these things, all the participants found story-forms in their experiences of the past and in their anticipations of the future through which to construct wider narratives providing meaning to their present self-interpretations. As they talked, participants sometimes said things like, 'I think the meaning of life is to be happy' (Abigail) or 'I think the purpose of life is... [to be] able to live the way you want' (Katie). Some participants had concepts or mottos such as, 'you only live once' or 'follow your dreams' (Karl).

But they would also state clearly that there was no overarching meaning to life beyond the meanings they found for themselves, and, like some of the participants interviewed by Collins-Mayo *et al.* (2010), having ‘goals and something to work towards’ (Alice) by making plans for future careers (Rachel, William, Zoe) and for families of their own (Leah) made life purposeful but did not constitute visions about the purpose of life. As Alice said, there is no ‘outer purpose besides what you decide is your purpose’.

At the time of their interviews, therefore, the young people who participated in this research appeared to reject the idea of searching for an overarching framework of metaphysical or existential belief, meaning or purpose – whether religious or secular. However, they did not lack belief, meaning and purpose but expressed these as ‘more modest’, smaller-scale ‘midi-narratives’ or ‘chain[s]’ of memory and meaning instead of as meta-narratives (Savage *et al.* 2006:38; Collins-Mayo *et al.* 2010:44). It might be suggested, however, that the narrative of self-improvement in particular functioned in participants’ lives as an overarching framework of (secular) meaning and purpose, affecting how they perceived their pasts, occupied their time in the present, and felt about their futures. There was an expectation that participants should constantly strive to improve their lives, with the importance of working hard at school in order to achieve a career that was both personally satisfying and financially rewarding an especially prevalent form of this narrative. But participants also related this narrative of self-improvement to ‘local family-centric’, or ‘midi-’ rather than ‘meta-’, narratives (Collins-Mayo *et al.* 2010:44) rather than to a wider cultural narrative about financial success and upwards social mobility, for example.

Further consideration of the extent to which this narrative of self-improvement constitutes an overarching vision or framework of secular meaning in

the lives of young people today would be worth exploring further in the future. But participants' constructions of religion as private, individualised propositional beliefs of a metaphysical and/or ethical nature meant that they at least felt that an overarching framework of *religious* meaning would limit their experiences of life. And yet a number of participants also suggested that religion might be something they would consider exploring further when they were older. As they were also interested in their pasts and futures, and often saw their episodes from their lives in the form of a narrative, further exploration of whether the need for an overarching meaning and purpose to their lives becomes more pressing, or whether religion becomes more important as they grow older, could be examined by inviting young people to share narratives at different stages of their life.

Catto and Eccle's (2013) study of the narratives of young atheists illustrates how interview-based qualitative research can provide space for participants to reflect more deeply on how their wider lives might have influenced their non-theistic stances. However, I also think that this approach might be developed in the future to include a number of interviews with research participants over longer periods of time. Conducting interviews that focus specifically on participants' narratives would provide more opportunities for exploring further Ricoeur's three-fold mimetic process, and mimesis₃ (refiguration) in particular. Participants' narratives about the past and the future were constructed from their prefigured experiences of life, but both Abigail and Stacey understood the interview as an opportunity to tell me their life stories or self-narratives and Stacey was particularly interested in the possibility that those who heard her story could learn from her example. While it is not possible to draw conclusions about whether these participants reconfigured their life stories to find new meaning in them through their re-telling during the interview, but, in

becoming the hearer of their own life stories in the telling, there was at least the potential for them to reconfigure meanings. It would therefore be interesting to explore whether interviewing young people at different stages of their lives and sharing earlier transcripts with them to provide opportunities for the reading and interpreting of their own ‘texts’ might lead them to gain deeper understanding of their lives and generate interesting and important data about their self-interpretations, self-identities and relationships with religion at different times in their lives.

Erikson’s concept of a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ during adolescence, in which there is a ‘delay of adult commitments’ (2004[1968]:157), might be helpful when asking whether what some researchers consider to be important in life and for the formation of identity is necessarily shared by younger people. If, as Erikson suggests, it is important for adolescents to enjoy a period of time in which they are free of adult responsibilities and concerns and have the opportunity for ‘experimentation with identity’ (2004[1968]:158), this might also be a time in their lives in which the formation of a coherent and overarching framework of meaning is less important than it appears to be for some researchers of youth and religion in their own adult lives. Conducting interviews with teenagers at different stages of their lives, in which they are invited to share their self-interpretations and narratives and reflect on their perspectives of religion, belief and the importance of an overarching meaning and purpose to life, would enable us to explore further whether and how these have become more or less significant for young people over time, as well as the extent to which these have shaped their self-understandings and identities.

Implications for the Study of Religion and Belief in Schools

Participants often understood religion to be primarily concerned with private, individualised metaphysical beliefs about God or ethical beliefs that limited one’s

experience of life. This perception of religion was perhaps not surprising considering how it is often presented in GCSE Religious Studies syllabuses and examinations. The emphasis on the literal truth content of propositional beliefs in RE has played a part in creating the impression that this constitutes the essence of religion and is what religious people are most concerned with. Many of the recommendations made by the BHA for the inclusion of non-religious beliefs such as humanism in RE also emphasises the importance of the content of belief and the assessment of religious truth claims. But their recommendations do not question whether focusing on the literal truth of religious beliefs is necessarily a helpful way of studying religion in schools. The changes to GCSE Religious Studies that will come into force in 2016 appear to be designed to enable pupils to develop religious literacy through the study of religious texts as well as philosophy and ethics, and this would seem to be an improvement on the more narrow focus on the content of belief that has characterised both the recent ‘philosophical’ turn in RE and the BHA’s recommendations. But my research with young people of no religion suggests that exploring the function of belief within the RE classroom could enable young people to understand the nature of belief more broadly, rather than viewing it as solely propositional and peculiar to religion.

In campaigning for the inclusion of non-religious philosophies in RE, the BHA often assert that, since a significant percentage (61 per cent) of young people are thought not to believe in God, these pupils should be represented in RE through the inclusion of a non-religious belief system such as humanism. But these arguments regarding the non-religious identities of pupils of no religion and the irrelevance of religion and religious belief for their lives draw on data from surveys of young people in which they were asked to respond to statements of belief, rather

than from more in-depth qualitative studies of young people's understanding of belief and how it functions in their lives (Mason 2001a; drawing on Francis & Kay 1995). Nevertheless, the BHA argue that, if the majority of pupils in the RE classroom do not follow a religion, this should be reflected in the content of RE syllabuses. Writing in 2001 as the BHA's education officer, Marilyn Mason suggested that, 'If RE is supposed to help pupils towards a sense of identity and a formulation of their own life stance it should not ignore such a large section of the population' (2001b:n.p.). Secular philosophies like humanism should therefore be taught alongside the six main world religions.

Several of the main assumptions underlying this proposal can also be seen in the Institute for Public Policy Research's report *What is Religious Education for?* (2004) – a report based on a seminar supported by the BHA in order to help shape the first ever National Framework for Religious Education in 2004. This report privileges a particular understanding of belief over all others and assumes that this aspect of religion is more important than all others. The authors reduce religion to the assent to propositional truth claims and thereby see no problem in accommodating humanism in RE. They write that the emphasis in RE should be shifted from 'empathising to evaluating, from trying to imagine what it is like to hold certain beliefs to asking what grounds there are for doing so', enabling pupils to rationally judge 'the truth or falsity of religious propositions' (2004:6). The BHA and this IPPR report share an assumption that the study of beliefs is of central importance, not only in relation to religion and non-religious philosophies but for the purpose of RE and the education and development of young people. But such proposals raise several questions, including whether the purpose of RE should be identity formation and whether the content of this subject should reflect the life stances of the pupils

studying it. However, my research indicates that it is also far from clear whether humanism would necessarily reflect the diversity of relationships to religion held by young people who follow none.

Both those who have advocated a philosophical turn in RE and those who have called for the inclusion of secular philosophies in RE syllabuses consider beliefs about the world to be of critical importance for the study of both religion and non-religion. But although theistic beliefs form an important part of some religions, they are not necessarily of central importance to all followers of those religions, nor are they central to all faiths. Similarly, atheistic beliefs may not be of paramount importance for many people who do not follow any religion. This has been suggested in qualitative studies of non-religious adults (Lee 2012b;2014) and is reflected in the perspectives of many of the young people who participated in this research. In particular, the question of whether the *content* of participants' belief is conventionally described as religious or as non-religious is not as important to young people of no religion as the question of how these beliefs *function* in their lives. Critically studying the truth content of non-religious propositional beliefs in RE might not, therefore, be as constructive for the 'silent majority' (Rudge 1998) in these classrooms as the BHA assume. If the 'silent minority' of *religious* pupils often feel that their religions are being misrepresented in RE, as religious educator Daniel Moulin (2011) argues, it is also possible that the beliefs, behaviours and belongings of the silent majority of young people who do *not* follow a religion could be equally misrepresented by study a form of non-religion that is similarly focused primarily on a particular type of atheistic belief. Empirical research with young people, including my own, suggests that it might be misguided, therefore, to assume that the philosophical exploration of religious and non-religious beliefs is the key to engaging

pupils in the study of religion and non-religion in school settings. Exploring what Meredith B. McGuire has described as the ‘ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices’ that shape the lives of religious adherents (2008:4) might be one way in which RE could move beyond an emphasis on truth claims and the propositional content of beliefs. But understanding the lives of those who report ‘no religion’ as similarly messy, contradictory and, often, an amalgam of religious, non-religious and a-religious beliefs and practices, could also move us beyond current debates about RE and secular philosophies. It might be more helpful to consider alternative approaches to RE that can focus on the nature of belief and the variety of ways belief can function in people’s lives.

Such an exploration of the significance and function of beliefs could be facilitated by following Robert Jackson’s ‘interpretive approach’ to RE (1997;2000; 2004;2011). Although this approach was originally designed as a method to aid the study of religion at Key Stages One, Two and Three, and, as Jackson notes, ‘lends itself particularly to the study of contemporary religious practice’ (2011:190), it could, I believe, also be fruitfully used for the exploration of how belief functions in the lives of older pupils who follow religious traditions as well as those who do not. Rather than present religious traditions to young people as ‘homogenous belief systems, whose essence is expressed through set structures and whose membership is seen in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions’ (2011:191), the interpretive approach draws on ethnographic studies of children within religious communities (e.g. Jackson & Nesbitt 1993) to engage pupils with ‘ethnographic data on children from religious backgrounds, portrayed in the context of the communities in which they lived and the wider religious tradition to which they related’ (Jackson 2011:190). But Jackson proposes that the interpretive approach could also encourage

and assist ‘pupil-to-pupil dialogue’ between ‘children from different religious and cultural backgrounds’ enabling them ‘to communicate with and learn from one another’ within the RE classroom (2011:190).

Another important element of this approach is that ‘the religious symbols, concepts and experiences of those being studied’ are contrasted with ‘the nearest equivalent concepts, symbols and experiences of the researcher or learner (whether religious or not)’. Through this process, ‘learners are encouraged to review their understanding of their own worldview in relation to what they have studied’ (2011:191-2). As Jackson writes:

An interpretive approach includes the possibility that students might have their own views deepened through the study of other positions, whether outside or related to their own traditions. ... The approach also recognises that students’ own religio-cultural experience can and should be part of the subject matter of religious education, and that there is the possibility of developing new ideas through pupils from different backgrounds interacting with one another (2000:144).

This approach enables ‘students to gain insight from their peers’ so that the ‘content’ of the lesson is not delivered solely by the teacher but also includes ‘the knowledge and experiences of the participants’ – the pupils studying religion. This means that the interpretive approach ‘can also start from the questions and concerns of students, move to individuals or groups within a tradition or to general ideas from a tradition, and then back again to the student’. This is why, as Jackson notes, he and his colleagues at the Warwick Religious Education Research Unit think it is important ‘to take a research interest in the life-worlds of children and young people, partly in order to find potential starting points for pedagogic practice’ (2000:142-3).

This is where I believe my research with young people of no religion might contribute to the study of religion and belief in schools. By listening to my participants' perspectives on religion and belief, it became clear that although religion is often rejected because it was thought to consist of propositional beliefs of a metaphysical or ethical nature, examining their beliefs in relation to what they considered to be important illustrated how these beliefs functioned in their lives. It might therefore be helpful within RE lessons for pupils to reflect on the significance of beliefs in their lives and to share these with other pupils with different perspectives, enabling them to develop a broader understanding of how belief functions for different people and how such functions are not peculiar to religious belief. Providing space within the curriculum, therefore, to encourage pupils to explore the nature and function of their own beliefs might help pupils move away from some of the assumptions about religion that were made during our interviews. Dialogue between pupils might also help young people express their beliefs without fear of being judged for expressing views that differ from those that are often understood as representative of religious or non-religious 'orthodoxies'. It might also help young people move away from the assumption that beliefs act as markers of religious or non-religious identities, and that people are necessarily either religious or non-religious because they hold certain beliefs. Furthermore, it might help pupils recognise that many of the beliefs that people hold need not be supported by empirical evidence in order to be of significance and value. This could also be extended to the study of narratives and descriptions of miraculous events within religious texts and consideration of whether these need to be interpreted literally in order to be of value, or whether such stories, as well as other types of narrative, can enrich our lives without necessarily being true. This might encourage pupils to move

beyond the ‘belief-disbelief dichotomy’, allowing them to become ‘engaged in religious content without literally believing it’ (Wulff 1999:9) and thereby increasing their knowledge and appreciation of some of the many ways in which religion and belief can be understood.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of what is important to young nones, this study has examined how matters of importance and relationships of difference to religion were related: their constructions of religion and their decision to report none were influenced by what they considered to be matters of importance, and what they considered important in life was reflected in their beliefs about God, life after death, the supernatural and prayer. While many participants held beliefs adapted from religious traditions, they differentiated these from their constructions of religion and most, therefore, lived their lives without reference to religion. If, following Taylor, identity is understood as a self-interpretation related to matters of importance, the question of whether participants expressed non-religious identities depends on the relative significance of relationships of difference to religion in participants’ self-interpretations. For the majority of participants, their relationships of difference to religion were not of central importance in their self-interpretations, meaning that very few should be categorised as having a non-religious self-identity.

Examining assumptions about what is meant by reporting no religion has been possible through in-depth qualitative research with young people that moved beyond participants’ perspectives on religion and their reasons for having none. Future qualitative studies of youth, religion and non-religion should take account of what is important in young people’s lives beyond their perspectives on religion and belief or their (non-)religious identities and stances. Combining this wider focus with

an exploration of research participants' relationships to religion enables a deeper understanding of why young people wish to differentiate themselves from religion, and how ostensibly religious beliefs continue to function in their lives and provide meaning and purpose. This is also something that young people themselves could learn more about in RE. Space within the curriculum could be found to encourage pupils to explore the nature of belief more broadly, enabling them to recognise the role that belief plays in all our lives, rather than viewing it as something peculiar to people who follow religious traditions. These insights from my research with 14- and 15-year-olds therefore not only contribute to future studies of youth and (non-) religion but are also relevant to educationalists and policy makers who are interested in helping young people engage more deeply with the study of religion and belief in school.

Appendix

Questionnaire

1. What is your name and tutor group?

First name _____

Last name _____

Tutor group _____

2. Are you...? (please tick one)

Male ☐ Female ☐

3. What is your date of birth? (please write as day/month/year)

4. How many people live together with you in your home?

5. What is your ethnic group? (please tick one)

Asian Bangladeshi ☐ Asian Pakistani ☐ Asian Indian ☐ Other Asian ☐ Black-

Caribbean ☐ Black African ☐ Chinese ☐ Eastern or Central European ☐ Mixed ☐

White ☐ Other, write in _____

6. What exam subjects are you studying at school?

7. How would you describe your national identity? (please tick one)

English ☐ Welsh ☐ Scottish ☐ Northern Irish ☐ British ☐

Other, write in _____

8. What is your religion? (please tick one)

No religion ☐ Buddhist ☐ Hindu ☐ Jewish ☐ Muslim ☐ Sikh ☐

Christian (Church of England, Catholic, Protestant, all other Christian denominations) ☐

Other, write in _____

9. What are your hobbies and interests?

Interview Questions

Photo-Elicitation Questions

1. What does this photo show? Why is it important? When is it important?

General Interview Questions

2. Who or what is the most important thing in life? Why?
3. Can you tell me about particular times in your life that are important to you and why?
4. What are rights and wrongs for you?
5. How do you know what is right and wrong?
6. How does knowing what is right and wrong affect the way you live your life?
7. What do you believe in? How does that affect the way you live your life?
8. What happens to you after you die?
9. Do you have any supernatural beliefs? What are they? (e.g. ghosts, angels, fairies, witches, spells, spirits, energies, horoscopes, fortune telling, luck, fate etc.)
10. What do you most enjoy in life?
11. Can you tell me about something that you are really dedicated to? How does it relate to the rest of your life?
12. When are you happiest?
13. When are you most unhappy? What helps you to feel better?
14. What frightens or worries you? What comforts or reassures you at these times?
15. What are your plans/hopes for the future?
16. What sort of life do you want to live?

17. Do you ever think about the purpose or meaning of life? If so, what do you think?
18. Are there any fictional characters, or famous people from any time in history that you think represent what a good life should be? Or that illustrate what you think the purpose of life should be?
19. Are there any songs, films, TV programmes, games or books which have influenced what you think or how you live?
20. Who/What else influences the way you live your life? How and why?

Questions about 'no religion' and 'religion'

21. Can you tell me about why you ticked the 'no religion' box on the questionnaire?
22. Can you tell me about what 'religion' means to you?
23. Do you discuss religion with family/friends? If so, can you describe what your family/friends think about religious things?
24. When did you last take part in something that you consider to be 'religious'?

Statements

Which of the following (printed on separate cards) do you agree with? Why?

1. 'I think that religious beliefs are false'
2. 'I believe in God but I don't belong to any organised religion'
3. 'I don't need religion to make sense of my life'
4. 'I don't need religion to live a good life'
5. 'I don't know whether there is or isn't a God'
6. 'I don't have a belief in God'
7. 'I'm not bothered about religion, religious beliefs, spirituality or God'
8. 'I haven't been brought up in any religion, but I do believe in God'
9. 'I haven't decided which religion I want to belong to yet'
10. 'I'm better off without religion'
11. 'I think that "religion" would get in the way of my relationship with God'
12. 'I'm not religious but I am spiritual'
13. 'I'm too busy for religion at the moment, but I might have time later in life'
14. 'It's good to know religion is there if I need it, but at the moment I don't think I do'
15. 'Religion is occasionally important to me but usually not'
16. 'I don't belong to any religion but I do think there might be a supernatural power or life force'

Publications and Presentations

Journal Articles

Wallis, S. (2014) Researching 'Young Nones': Young People and the emerging field of non-religion and secularity studies, and questions about religious education. *Working Papers of the Warwick Institute of Education Graduate Association (WIEGA)* 6, 71-83

Wallis, S. (2014) Ticking 'no religion': A case study amongst 'young nones'. *DISKUS*, 16 (2), 70-87.

Conference and Seminar Papers

'Young Nones: The Lives of Young People of No Religion' *Building Bridges*, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, 2 November 2014

'Why do people report "no religion"? A case study amongst "young nones": the census respondents of the future', *Religion, Migration, Mutation*, European Association for the Study of Religion annual conference, Liverpool Hope University, 4th September 2013.

'Educating "Young Nones": Young People of "No Religion" and Religious Education in England', *Religious Education in a Global-Local World*, Study of Religions Department, University College Cork, 30th August 2013.

"Young Nones": Introducing Research on the Lives of Young People of "No Religion", *Religion and Childhood: Theory, Research and Pedagogy*, Centre for Religion and Contemporary Society, University of Kent, 10th July 2013 [invited speaker].

'Faith beyond Belief in Religious Education', *Religion and Citizenship: Rethinking the Boundaries of Religion and the Secular*, The British Sociological

Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group and Higher Education Academy Teaching and Studying Religion annual symposium, Imperial Wharf, London, 13th December 2012.

'Beyond Belief? The Study of Non-Religion and Its Inclusion in Religious Education', *Nonreligion and the Secular: New Horizons for Multidisciplinary Research*, The Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network annual conference, Goldsmiths, University of London, 4th July 2012.

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